

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND OF DEATH

PART II: THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
ISLAND OF DEATH
Part II: The Forgotten People**

Pete is trapped in a ship heading to the Island of Death in the Pacific Ocean. Unwittingly, he finds himself masquerading as a member of the team engaged to carry out a mission on the island. However, nobody aboard the ship seems to know what they are supposed to do. Very soon, the rest of the team becomes suspicious of Pete. Meanwhile, a stranger appears offering Jupiter and Bob the chance to rescue their fellow investigator...

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Island of Death
Part II: The Forgotten People

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Contents

- 1. The Shadow Men**
- 2. The Deadly Double**
- 3. The Nervous Lion**
- 4. The Raven**
- 5. Insect Attacks**
- 6. The Magic Circle**
- 7. The Scar-Faced Beggar**
- 8. Mutiny at Sea**
- 9. The Silver Spider**
- 10. The Laughing Shadow**
- 11. The Missing Sailor**
- 12. Death Trap Mine**

1. The Shadow Men

“Pete!!!” Bob’s call echoed across the open sea. The ship was already too far away. He was sure no one there had heard him. Bob desperately searched the docks.

Maybe Pete had jumped overboard and was swimming back to the pier. But apart from the even waves the *Explorer* had created, nothing was stirring in the water.

“So why didn’t he jump off the ship?” Bob asked.

“Maybe they found him and held him back,” Jupiter said.

“What do we do now, Jupe? We know nothing about these people! We have to call the police!”

“Take it easy, Bob. Freaking out is pointless.” Jupiter wished he believed that himself.

“The *Explorer* is heading straight for Makatao. And Pete is on board. They’ll discover him sooner or later. He must get off the ship!” Bob cried.

“You’re right. But we can’t rush into anything now,” Jupe said. “If we do something rash, we may put Pete in even greater danger.”

Bob had hardly listened. “The harbour police! Surely they can catch up to the ship and stop it, right? Come on, Jupe, hurry!”

He had already turned to walk—when he almost stumbled over Jelena, who had appeared right behind him.

“No police!” she cried.

“Excuse me?” Bob gasped.

“No police,” she repeated.

“Why not? Pete is—”

“Pete is in even more danger if we call the police.”

Now Jupiter also turned around. “Just a moment. What are you trying to tell us?”

Jelena started to answer when Jupiter interrupted her with a gesture. “Wait! Where is Skinny?”

“Did that guy get away?” Bob asked.

“Don’t worry,” replied Jelena. “He is only paying the taxi driver.”

“Why did he do that?” Bob wondered.

“Because I told him so,” Jelena replied.

The First Investigator looked back. The taxi just left and Skinny came towards them with a scowl on his face.

Bob confronted him angrily. “What happened on board?”

“Nothing at all.”

“What did you do with Pete?” Bob continued shouting.

“Nothing, damn it!”

“But something must have been going on there!”

“I found him in the storeroom and told him to get out. That’s all.”

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“How should I know?”

Bob gritted his teeth. “What are we gonna do?”

Jupiter turned to Jelena. “Why shouldn’t we call the police?”

“Because the police are our greatest enemy,” Jelena said.

“Excuse me?” Jupe asked.

“If the police find out about this, the last advantage we have is gone—your cover.”

“What is this girl talking about?” Skinny asked angrily, but no one paid any attention to him.

“Remember? Worthington was shadowed by unknown men for the past few days,” Jelena said. “And so was I. Tonight, one of those guys was standing just outside my house. So I called the police.”

“So?” Bob asked. “Did they catch the guy?”

Jelena nodded. “And they let him go right away.”

“Sorry? Why is that?”

“The cop grabbed the guy, then they talked and finally the cop let him go and came to me,” Jelena explained. “He told me that I didn’t have to worry, the man in our garden wasn’t dangerous. On the contrary, he was there for my own safety.”

“So you freaked out,” Bob guessed.

“No, I did not. I pretended to be terribly reassured by that completely stupid statement, and sent the cop away.”

“What’s this girl talking about?” Skinny repeated.

She glared at him furiously. “My name is Jelena. And I watched the brief skirmish between them outside the gate with binoculars and saw something that surpassed our worst fears.” Then she paused.

“Come on, Jelena!” Bob cried.

“The guy stuck an ID under the cop’s nose,” Jelena said. “A CIA ID.”

It took a moment for Bob to understand what Jelena had said. So did Jupiter and Skinny. Suddenly, all three of them said: “The Secret Service?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Bob exclaimed.

“You expect me to believe that?” Skinny sneered. “The CIA! Don’t make me laugh!”

“I know what I saw. It was an ID from the Secret Service. And that means we’re involved in something the government is involved in.”

“Hah! What is this all about? Arms dealing? Espionage? Or maybe aliens have landed on Makatao?” Skinny giggled.

“You tell us!” Jupiter calmly demanded.

“I say, this girl here is working up something,” Skinny smirked.

Jelena was about to explode, but Jupiter held her back.

“I think you know exactly what’s going on here, Skinny. You know more than you’ve told us so far,” Jupiter demanded.

“What are you talking about, Fatso?”

“You led us here and lured Pete aboard the *Explorer*,” Jupiter said, angrily. “You knew that ship was leaving tonight.”

“I didn’t know!”

“Are you telling us that it would have left even if you hadn’t got on board?” Jupiter demanded.

“How should I know? Hadden said the ship was leaving at one o’clock. Maybe I misunderstood him and he meant 1 am!”

“You don’t believe that yourself,” Jupiter said calmly. “The crew has been waiting for you. Five minutes after you were on board, they started the engines and you climbed back down unnoticed. And that’s when you abandoned Pete.”

“I told you I didn’t know they were leaving tonight, okay? And I warned your friend Crenshaw! It’s not my fault if he was too stupid or too slow to get away in time.”

The First Investigator looked into Skinny’s eyes for a long time. It was maddening—he couldn’t assess him. Skinny Norris was devious, sneaky and vicious. But was that really a lie? Was Skinny really smart enough to fool them all?

Jupiter did not know and dared to take one last shot in the dark: “What is the *Explorer* going to do on Makatao? What does Hadden want? What

does the CIA have to do with this? Or to cut a long story short—what is this about, Skinny?”

Skinny’s eyes narrowed. He took a step towards Jupiter and bent down towards him so that the tips of their noses almost touched. “Listen, Fatso, you seem so smart and important. Jupiter MacSherlock, the great master detective! But the truth is, you have absolutely no idea. You want to know what this is all about? Then find out for yourself! I’ve told you everything I know. And I won’t let you blame me anymore.” He turned and walked back along the pier towards the road with big but steady steps.

“Hey!” cried Bob. “Do you think you could just walk away now?”

“Leave him, Bob. Skinny’s no help to us for now,” Jupe said. “Either he really doesn’t know anything or he doesn’t want to tell us. It’s the same thing.”

Jupiter gave a deep sigh. He stared into the darkness that lay over the Pacific. From a distance, the noise of the industrial port, which went on day and night, came over to them. Somewhere a seagull screeched. Then he heard the engine of Skinny’s sports car howl. Jupiter shivered.

“Why can’t we call the police?” Bob tentatively broke the silence. “If the CIA is in this, it’s too big for us. We could tell Inspector Cotta everything we know. And then—”

“We’ll never solve the mystery,” Jelena interrupted him.

“Maybe not us, but the CIA,” Bob said.

Jelena shook her head. “They won’t tell us anything.”

“Why not?” Bob asked.

“Because something is being covered up here! Don’t you understand? Makatao is surrounded by an impenetrable veil of mystery. Didn’t you say yourself that during the investigation you had the feeling that someone’s trying to keep something secret?”

Bob nodded.

“And don’t you think that the men from the CIA would have just asked Worthington or me instead of following us if this was anything other than a covert operation?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know about the CIA,” Bob confessed.

“Maybe... maybe that’s how they work. They probably even sneak in quietly when they’re just shopping at the supermarket.”

Jupiter shook his head. “I agree with Jelena. There is something going on that should be kept secret at all costs. And once we go to the police, we’re out of it and we’ll never know what’s really going on.”

“But we are not just talking about puzzles, secrets and the professional honour of the famous Three Investigators who investigate anything. It’s about Pete! He’s in danger!” Bob cried. “Who knows what they’ll do to him. Maybe they’ll throw him to the sharks. If the CIA feels the need to keep something from us, so be it. I’ll gladly forego some answers if it means saving Pete. Besides, it’s perfectly within the rights of a government agency to keep secrets.”

“Even if the people are deceived and cheated?” Jupe asked.

“Who’s concerned about this?” Bob wondered.

“I do,” Jupe replied. “This thing stinks, Bob. It really stinks. There’s something really big going on that shouldn’t be exposed under any circumstances. But we do have one last trick up our sleeve. So far, no one has any idea that we’re on to it. Only Worthington and Jelena are under surveillance,” Jupe said and turned to Jelena. “I hope you made sure that nobody followed you here, Jelena.”

“How stupid do you think I am?” Jelena quipped. “After the cop left, so did the CIA guy. I guess he figured now that I knew I was being watched, I wouldn’t do anything anyway. Well, he thought wrong.”

“Great. The Three Investigators alone against the Secret Service of the United States,” Bob grumbled gloomily. “That means, in fact, there are now only two of us.”

Jupiter nodded. “I hope Pete keeps his nerves on the ship. Maybe he will even manage not to be discovered until his arrival on Makatao.”

“If he hasn’t been discovered already,” Bob added.

“We are lucky his parents are on vacation,” Jupe remarked. “They’d be freaking out if Pete wasn’t here by tomorrow morning.”

“Lucky?” Bob frowned. “Well, I don’t know. They’d call the police. And I’m still not convinced that that wouldn’t be the smartest thing to do. Intelligence spies! This is way out of our league! And we don’t even have a plan. How are we gonna save Pete? Have you thought about something, Jupe? Shall we follow the *Explorer*?”

The First Investigator looked to the ground. “We’ll think of something.”

“What? And especially when?” Bob asked.

“Don’t panic! We...” He faltered. His gaze was fixed on one of the containers.

“What is it, Jupe?”

“There is something!” Jupe exclaimed.

“Where? What?” Bob asked.

“A movement,” Jupe said. “At the end of the pier. There’s someone sneaking around. He disappeared behind the first container on the right.”

“Skinny?” Jelena thought.

“He left, remember?” Jupe remarked. “Come on, let’s stroll back slowly and pretend we’re engrossed in conversation. When we get to the container, let’s pick up the pace and see who is spying on us.”

“What if it’s a CIA agent?” Bob asked.

“At least then we’ll know we’re being watched by the Secret Service. Come on!” Jupe whispered.

Out of the corner of their eyes, they searched the surroundings but everything remained calm—no movement, no shadows. Then they reached the three-metre-high container. Jupiter jumped forward and looked behind the steel monster. At its other end stood a figure. The man was holding a camera in his hand but almost dropped it in fright when Jupiter suddenly appeared in his viewfinder. He whirled around as fast as lightning and disappeared behind the container.

“After him!” Jupiter cried and ran off. He knew he didn’t stand a chance if that guy was a little athletic, but he had to try. When he reached the back end of the container, he saw the man barely disappear behind a warehouse. Then another figure whizzed past him—Bob! He ran after the guy and a moment later he had disappeared as well.

The First Investigator tried to keep up for a few more seconds, but already a stabbing pain in his side became noticeable and shortly after that, he just couldn’t go on. Panting, he stopped, with his hands on his thighs and looked into the darkness where freight containers, flat port buildings and cranes waited like sleeping monsters for the next morning.

“What’s wrong?” Jelena rode up behind him. “Did he get away?”

“Away from me, definitely. But Bob is—”

The sound of a roaring engine and squealing tyres interrupted him. A pair of headlights shot around the corner of the warehouse and raced towards them.

“Look out!” Jupiter grabbed the handles of Jelena’s wheelchair and pushed her off the track. The car skidded past them, turned onto the road and disappeared.

“I could have done that myself,” grumbled Jelena.

“Yes, I know,” Jupe said. “Sorry, I’ll never try again.”

“You all right?” That was Bob running towards them. “He had too much of a lead. I just saw him jump into his car and then he was gone.”

“Did you recognize him?” Jupiter asked.

“No,” Bob said. “Well, I saw him, but I don’t know the man.”

“The CIA is shadowing us,” growled Jelena.

Jupiter nodded. “The assumption is obvious. He wanted to take pictures of us. But that’s not proof yet.”

“What difference does it make?” Bob remarked. “We can assume that we are under surveillance now. These shadow men could be anywhere, anytime. We are finished.”

2. The Deadly Double

It was a swing that woke him up. An eternal, infinitely slow up and down, which drove the blood sometimes into his head, sometimes into his legs. That's probably why he had such a headache. Also, his stomach was a little queasy.

Was he sick? Did he have a fever? Why else would his body feel so strange? Why did he feel like he was constantly being rocked back and forth? Besides, it was cold. He wanted to pull the blanket tighter around him, but then he realized that there was none. He was still wearing the same clothes—jeans, sweatshirt, shoes... Something was very wrong here.

Pete opened his eyes. A grey metal grating hovered barely a metre above him. He lay on the lower mattress of a bunk bed. It was a very narrow bunk bed in a very narrow room... A room with a tiny round window... A room that swung back and forth very slowly.

Suddenly everything came back to him. The harbour! The *Explorer*. The search for the crates and finally... Skinny, who warned him. Pete had wanted to disappear as fast as possible, but then someone had grabbed him and drugged him. Probably with a chloroform-soaked cloth. That would also explain his headache. After that, he must have been locked in that room.

The Second Investigator got up. A slight dizziness overcame him, but after a few seconds, it got better. He looked around. Pete had been on board ships before. The room was a normal sleeping cabin—extremely small and sparsely furnished. Outside it was almost light. Soon the sun would rise.

He looked out of the porthole—water as far as the eye could see. Only now did he panic. It rolled over him like a giant wave as if the fear had taken a few minutes longer to wake up. But now it was all the more powerful and pumped adrenalin through Pete's body. He was on board the *Explorer*. Someone had taken him by surprise and captured him! It was early morning, he had slept for hours and the ship was now at sea, a long distance away from home! And he was alone.

What would they do to him? Starve him here in the cabin? Throw him out to sea? Or worse? Torture him to reveal information he didn't have? The people of Sphinx were unscrupulous gangsters, capable of anything!

He had to get out of here! Pete looked at the porthole. It was too small. Only a little boy could have squeezed through it. So all that remained was the door. Without much hope, Pete groped for his lock picking case. They had probably taken it from him. But, no! There it was! They had been stupid enough not to search him.

He jumped to the door, looked at the lock, turned the knob just to see if it worked... and flinched with surprise. The door swung open with a squeak. It was not locked at all! Pete took a step back. What kind of a strange prison would this be? Did the crew assume that he posed no danger on board a ship from which he could not escape anyway? Well, they were probably right.

What else could he do? Like Bruce Willis single-handedly, little by little, surprise and lock up everyone? Certainly not. But maybe he could get away? There had to be a life raft! Or maybe he could send a distress signal by radio...

The corridor was empty and all doors were closed. Pete remembered again. Back there was the storeroom, here was the galley... But more importantly, everyone seemed to be asleep.

Not a sound except the constant creaking of the hull penetrated from the cabins. If he grabbed the lifeboat now, he could be long gone before anyone even noticed he was gone! Quietly, Pete crept up the steel stairs.

When he opened the door, a fresh wind blew in his face. It was the bitter smell of the Pacific Ocean. The rocking of the *Explorer* almost made the door slip out of his hand. Lucky for him, else that door slam would probably have woken everyone on board.

Gently he closed the door and looked around. There were still some wooden boxes on deck, but they were of no interest to him at the moment. He had to find the lifeboat! He hurriedly circled the deck superstructure.

There was a figure standing at the railing, looking out to sea—a woman with short, silvery grey hair, her windbreaker rattling in the stiff breeze. That had to be Dr Maria Svenson. Pete had seen her yesterday, but only from a distance and in the semi-darkness, but she was, as far as he knew, the only woman on board. In any case, she must not see him!

Pete turned around and retreated.

"Ah, good morning!"

The Second Investigator froze in the middle of the movement. She had seen him! Now it was all over! Should he run? But where to? This was a ship. A small one at that. There was no way to escape. No place to hide. He was finished. Slowly, he turned around.

“Now I see you without a hood. How are you doing, Skinner? Better than last night?” Dr Svenson gave him a friendly smile.

Pete suppressed the urge to turn his head around to see if there was someone else standing there that she was talking to. But of course there wasn't. Maria Svenson looked him straight in the eye. Skinner? Did she say ‘Skinner’? Her smile petrified. Pete realized she was waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” he said automatically. “Much better.” Even though he didn't know what she was talking about.

She laughed. “But you still seem a little tired. That's all right. So am I. But I couldn't sleep. The first night on a ship... You know, you have to get used to the rocking. So I thought I'd come up on deck and watch the sunrise.” She turned around again. And as if on command, the first patch of the red-gold sun appeared on the horizon. It drew a glittering ribbon on the surface of the sea.

What could he do? What should he do? Go back below deck as soon as possible? Jump overboard? Talk to Maria Svenson? But about what? She obviously thought he was Skinny—which was absurd, because apart from their height, Pete and Skinny had absolutely nothing in common.

Wait a minute! She said ‘Now I see you without a hood’. So that was it—Svenson hadn't seen Skinny's face at all last night, or even recognized his voice from their brief encounter at the pier.

But what about the others? Someone had drugged him last night and dragged him into the cabin. Didn't the perpetrator inform the rest of the crew that he'd been caught? Anyway sooner or later, someone would inevitably recognize or reveal that he was not Skinny Norris. It was better to clear up the mistake right now. Maybe then they would let him go. After all, he was completely harmless. He hadn't uncovered any secret yet, hadn't seen anything forbidden, he was—

“I hope you don't think I'm curious, Skinner,” she continued without turning around. “But now that we've cast off and Hadden's a long way off from us, wouldn't it be time to reveal the secret?”

“The... secret?” Pete shot blood to the head and then to the feet. His legs got shaky.

“You know. Why you’re on board?”

“I... uh...” Pete stammered.

“The entire crew has been puzzled for days. We ask ourselves what is Hadden trying to send us a boy who knows nothing about seafaring or archaeology?” Dr Svenson said. “I don’t mean to offend you, Skinner, but that’s the way it is, isn’t it?”

She turned to him again. Her smile wasn’t quite so radiant anymore. And her eyes weren’t smiling at all anymore.

“Well, you may be right. Because the thing is... I’m—”

“Good morning, everyone!” A small but strongly-built man came down the stairs from the bridge. His dark hair was ruffled by the wind. He must have been sitting at the bridge all along.

“Hello, Olin! How was your night?” Dr Svenson said.

“Quiet. And if you relieve me right now, I’m gonna go to sleep. Maria, Skinner, slept well?”

“Not really,” Dr Svenson replied. “But I’m glad you came. Skinner was about to tell me why he’s here.”

“Really?” Olin came closer. He was half a head shorter than Pete and smiled at him nicely. “I’m curious about that too.”

“I... I am...” He couldn’t do it. “I guess I’m some kind of cabin boy.”

“Hadden said that, too,” Olin said.

“Unfortunately, we do not need a cabin boy,” added Dr Svenson. “Are you Hadden’s nephew or something?”

Pete shook his head. “No. Excuse me, I have to... I have to go to the toilet.”

As calmly as possible, he walked back to the stairs. He realized that he was going way too fast. Pete knew it looked like an escape. It was. The Second Investigator stumbled below deck and ran to his cabin.

“Good morning, Skinner.” A huge guy came out of the galley with his head down. “Breakfast in half an hour!”

Pete just nodded, pushed himself into his cabin, closed the door and locked it. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Skinny! Everyone on this ship thought he was Skinny! That was absolutely crazy. Because one of those people could be the one who knocked him down last night. Why did everyone pretend to know nothing? Or was that the truth? Did they really know nothing? Either way, sooner or later, the culprit would unmask him. And if he didn’t, the cover would

blow automatically. Either way, he was done. He had to get out of here. Now! Pete indulged in his boundless panic for several minutes.

But then his mind came back on again. Why had he not told the truth just now on deck? Why had he fled instead of revealing his true identity? The longer he hesitated, the greater his difficulties would be when the others learned the truth.

Now, wait a minute! Skinny Norris! Perhaps it was Skinny who caught him by surprise last night! Maybe he just wanted to lure Pete out of his hiding place with his warning and then put him out of action with the chloroform. Pete couldn't imagine for the life of him what that was for, but after all, it was Skinny! Who could understand what was going on in his sick brain?

So if none of the crew, but Skinny was the culprit, then maybe they didn't need to know the truth.

Suddenly Pete envisioned what Jupiter would have said to him in a situation like this. Despite the First Investigator's ingenuity and razor-sharp wit, he was predictable. "This is a unique opportunity, Pete!—an opportunity to unlock all the secrets of this expedition! You just gotta be cool. All you gotta do is to follow through with the deception that you are Skinny." That is exactly what Jupiter Jones would have said at that moment.

Well, almost. He probably would have phrased it a little more complicated. Pete would have been upset, but Jupiter wouldn't have let up and eventually convinced him... Or at least persuaded him.

There was only one catch. The team expected something from Skinny—the reason he was there, something he should do or say or know. But Pete could not live up to these expectations because he had no idea what it was all about. Yes, now he realized that the crew had no idea either. In fact, he hadn't even seen all of them yet! He has just met Maria Svenson and Olin. Juan should be one that speaks with a Spanish accent. That leaves the giant from the galley, so he is probably Mr Schwartz.

It was madness—sheer madness. Pete would have loved to slap himself in the face when he decided to leave the cabin half an hour later to take part in the joint breakfast in the galley. Jupiter would have been proud of him.

Jupiter felt miserable. He had hardly slept after returning from the pier. He had constantly seen Pete before his inner eye—how he was alone on the

ship, perhaps huddled anxiously in a hiding place, perhaps discovered long ago.

And why? Because Jupiter had done nothing. What had got into him? Why hadn't he called the police immediately? Sure, Jelena's discovery weighed heavily, but was it all worth it? Even if the CIA was involved—that was not an argument to put Pete's life at risk! If they'd just called the harbour cops, a motorboat could have stopped the *Explorer*. Now it was too late for that, of course. The ship had been at sea for hours and would probably not stop until it reached Makatao.

But in that moment, when Jupiter sat at the breakfast table with puffy eyes and stared absently at a bowl of cornflakes, that wasn't even the worst of it. The worst thing was...

"Got the tickets, Titus?"

"They're still where they were the last time you asked—in my wallet."

"Really? I asked you before?"

"Repeatedly."

"Oh."

... Aunt Mathilda. For an hour, she ran around the house like a frightened chicken to make her last vacation preparations—which meant that she bombarded either her husband or her nephew with questions and detailed instructions.

"Don't forget to water my flowers, Jupe! But not too much. Flowers can tolerate a little less water—"

"—Than too much. I know, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter said. "You've been telling me that for a week."

Aunt Mathilda was smiling. "You're almost there, Jupe. In half an hour, your excited aunt and your much-too-composed uncle will be on their way to the airport. Then you'll be rid of us for two weeks. But don't do anything stupid, you hear?"

There was a lot Jupiter could have said to that... That he had already done a lot of stupid things... That he was about to commit more to make up for the first... That the next two weeks would be filled with stupidity.

"You know me." It was the only answer that would reassure Aunt Mathilda, and it wasn't a lie, but Jupiter had to use all his acting talent to bring the sentence light-heartedly across his lips.

"And if mail comes for the salvage yard, please put it on the desk in the office."

"Yes, Aunt Mathilda."

“And don’t forget to call your cousin Ty. It’s his birthday next week!”

“Yes, Aunt Mathilda.”

“And always lock the gate when you leave, you hear? Not just in the evening... Always!”

“Yes, Aunt Mathilda.”

“Leave the boy alone, Mathilda. He’s not a little kid anymore.”

Aunt Mathilda sighed. “I just want everything to be in order. That reminds me—do you have the tickets, Titus?”

Half an hour turned into three quarters of an hour, then the two finally took a taxi to the airport. Jupiter stood at the gate and waved to them. “Goodbye! Say hello to Hans and Konrad for me! And have fun!”

The taxi disappeared around the next bend, heading for Los Angeles. The First Investigator breathed again. Under normal circumstances, he would have made a joyous leap. No matter how much he liked his uncle and aunt, two weeks without a storm were always a reason for joy. But today he did not feel like cheering. He felt terrible.

He was just about to close the gate when a bicycle bell shrilled frantically. Bob came rushing by. “Was that your aunt and uncle in the taxi?” he asked, after he had come to a halt next to Jupiter with squeaking brakes.

“Yes. On the road to Germany.”

“Listen, Jupe, I’ve been thinking. We have to do something,” Bob said. “We can’t just leave Pete to his fate. We must—”

“—Call the police.” Jupiter nodded. “Yes, I know.”

Bob frowned. “You agree with me?”

“Yes.”

“But yesterday you were—”

“Yesterday was yesterday. But you were right, Bob,” Jupiter agreed. “Secrets or not, CIA or no CIA, we can’t do this on our own anymore. We don’t even know where to start.”

Bob sighed. “I’m glad you see things this way. Jelena, however, will not be pleased.”

“Fortunately, Jelena’s opinion is completely irrelevant,” Jupiter said slightly sourly. “Shall we call Cotta?”

“Agreed.”

Jupiter led Bob into the salvage yard and closed the gate. They were heading to Headquarters when someone knocked against the gate from the street.

“We’re closed!” Jupiter shouted back over his shoulder. “It says on the sign—‘Company Vacation’!”

“I’m looking for a Jupiter Jones,” a voice came over the gate.

Jupiter stopped and went back. He pushed the latch aside and opened one wing. Outside stood a man in a black suit. He looked like a bodyguard... or a chauffeur... or a messenger—one who was here on someone’s behalf to deliver a message.

“I am Jupiter Jones. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve been sent to pick you and Bob Andrews up.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“That may be. But I have orders to take you to Santa Monica.”

“Excuse me, I don’t quite understand. Who sent you?”

“Someone who wants to help you.”

3. The Nervous Lion

“There are a few quiet days ahead. I hope it’s not just the calm before the storm,” the giant said.

They all sat at the table in the galley at breakfast—all except Maria Svenson, who had relieved Olin and taken over the bridge. Meanwhile, Pete’s guess had been confirmed. The giant with a booming bass voice was Mr Schwartz, and he seemed to be something of an expedition leader. Schwartz was also the one who now explained to them what to expect in the next few days.

The courage that Pete had gathered in his cabin was gone as soon as he entered the galley. He was in the lion’s den. Three lions, to be exact—Mr Schwartz, Mr Olin and Juan, the grumpy Mexican. Only these lions didn’t know he was the prey.

Pete felt extremely uncomfortable. He stared at his plate and strained to chew on his jam toast. He decided to just keep on chewing so that he doesn’t have to say anything. But every bite stuck to his palate as dry as dust.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the three men sitting at the table with him. No one had yet shown a clear reaction to unmasked him as an intruder. No one had jumped up and exposed him as a spy. There was no knowing look and no sneaky grin. On the contrary, except for a more or less friendly good morning, everyone had ignored him until now. This meant that it was either really Skinny who had stunned him—or that one of the people present had played a double game and pretended not to recognize him—whatever his aims might be.

“The *Explorer* is an extremely fast ship,” Mr Schwartz said. “We’ll reach Makatao in a week if nothing comes between us. I know this is a very unusual assignment for all of us. So we will complete our mission as quickly as possible and return with Professor Phoenix and his team.”

“If they’re still alive.” All heads turned to Mr Olin.

“Of course they are,” Schwartz claimed brusquely.

“How can you be so sure?” Olin asked. “What makes you think we were sent out on anything other than a rescue mission?”

“Hadden wouldn’t have given us this equipment if it was just to recover bodies,” Schwartz replied.

“But Mr Hadden would not care if anyone from Sphinx died on the expedition,” Juan added. “In fact, he’d probably be quite happy he’d have to pay out less.”

Schwartz gave Juan a disapproving look, but then turned to Olin and said: “I don’t know what makes you think Phoenix and the others could be dead.”

“He hasn’t reported for over a week. No one knows why. Nobody knows anything at all. And then, of course, there’s the curse that everyone involved has so far neglected, not to mention, ignored.”

Pete listened up. “The curse?” In an instant, he bit his lips. He had wanted to keep quiet! If he wanted to get away with this huge lie, that was the only way—listen and keep quiet.

“The curse of the Island of Death,” Olin said.

Schwartz rolled his eyes. “Please, Olin, spare us your horror stories.”

“They are stories, yes,” Olin replied calmly. “The stories of an ancient people who visited this island hundreds of years ago. And we know very well why it was given this name ‘Makatao’... The Island of Death.”

Pete played the unsuspecting man. “Why?”

“Because the souls of the deceased ancestors find their final resting place on the island,” Olin explained. “And anyone who enters Makatao and disturbs that rest is doomed to die. It is said that no one has ever returned from the island.”

Pete recalled the stories that Bob had found out, and the story that Skinny told them. Olin’s version sounded very similar. Jupiter would’ve been thrilled to be in the lion’s den on his way to a cursed Island of Death. But not Pete. He hated it.

“If you believe in this nonsense,” Juan began, “then why are you here?”

Olin was not agitated, instead he answered calmly: “Because I have hope of still being able to save the others.”

“Nonsense!” Juan quipped. “They do it for the money like the rest of us.”

“Whatever you say,” Olin resigned.

For a while, there was a stubborn silence. Pete continued to chew. The hard-boiled egg slid down his gullet endlessly, no matter how much orange juice he poured behind it. Secretly he had hoped to travel with people who

got along well with each other and would forget about him completely. Instead, conflicts already piled up during the very first breakfast together—the first of a long week. He wished for nothing more than to wake up from this nightmare.

“Whatever our motives, I expect everyone to do their utmost,” Mr Schwartz took the floor again. “Hadden pays us to do his job as quickly and as competently as possible. Everything else is secondary. The bridge guard is divided into three shifts. You already have the shift schedules, otherwise we don’t have much to do on the trip.”

Then Schwartz turned to Pete. “What about you?”

“What... what about me?” he stammered.

“Can you steer this ship?”

“I... uh... no.”

Juan’s head twitched around “You can’t steer the ship?”

“Sorry, no.”

“I told you. This boy is good for nothing!” Juan cried. “Hadden only sent him along as a snitch. He can’t be trusted, any more than Hadden can be trusted.”

Juan talked about Pete as if he wasn’t even there. What was Skinny supposed to do on board the *Explorer*? The Second Investigator couldn’t think of an answer. The absurd thing was that Juan was even right. Skinny could be a kind of informer and the team had every conceivable reason not to trust him—and now Pete has to bear the brunt of it.

Silently, he cursed himself. He always knew Skinny was hiding something. But instead of insisting on the whole truth, he had given in to Jupiter’s good faith. This was what he got from it. Now the only thing he wanted most was to get off this cursed ship.

“What is it, Skinner?” Juan drilled. “Can you think of anything to say? Did you think you could hide behind your breakfast forever? For a week? Tell me, what are you supposed to do on board in the first place?”

“I don’t know! I just don’t know, okay?” Pete cleared his throat. “I’m not at liberty to discuss it.” That was a good answer. There was so much secrecy here, one secret more or less didn’t make much of a difference.

“If you think you can fool us, you’re sadly mistaken, laddie.” Juan continued.

“Leave the boy alone,” Olin said. “He certainly has as much right to be here as any of us... or Hadden wouldn’t have sent him along. Don’t be too nervous about this.”

“I don’t trust him,” Juan said.

“So you said,” Olin tried to calm him down.

“This guy’s gonna cause us a lot of trouble, I guarantee you!” Angrily, Juan shoved the last piece of toast in his mouth and left the room.

Great. By just being on the ship, Pete was already in trouble with one of the lions—the most irascible one of all. That started off well.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this at all,” Bob whispered. “What if this is a trap?”

“Pretty strange trap,” Jupiter replied. “Don’t panic, we’ll know more in a few minutes.”

They were sitting in the back seat of the black limousine in which the stranger had come to pick them up. But Bob was not quite sure if the man was really unknown to him. He had the impression he’d seen him before, but he wasn’t quite sure. Apart from that, he still couldn’t believe that Jupiter had so willingly agreed to go along with it. Haven’t they had enough trouble already? Did they now have to get into a car with a complete stranger to be driven to a secret meeting place at who knows where with who knows whom?

“If we want to know what is going on here, we have to accept the offer,” Jupiter had said. Perhaps he was even right. But that did not mean that Bob had to feel good about it... or not to panic.

Their chauffeur had not said a word about where they were going or whom they would meet. And the longer the journey lasted, the more Bob suppressed the desire to simply get off at the next red light. They took the coast road towards Santa Monica. The windows of the car were tinted so the sunlight barely penetrated the interior. The heat was also cut off by the air conditioning. It was like being in a coffin. Nice upholstery, but dark and cold.

Bob did not know exactly what he expected. A lonely villa on the outskirts of town? The top floor of a skyscraper? A deserted clearing in the back country where no one would hear their screams? In any case, he hadn’t expected the limousine to turn off to the beach in the middle of Santa Monica and stop in front of an ice cream parlour.

“Please sit down at one of the tables and wait,” said the driver.

“Then what?” Jupiter asked.

“Just wait.”

Bob and Jupiter exchanged astonished looks, but Bob was happy to leave the car and step out into the warm sunlight.

It was still early in the morning. The ice cream parlour had just opened, but so far only a few guests were there. The two detectives chose a table as far away as possible, ordered two milk shakes and looked around. The beach was still empty, but there were a number of joggers and people on roller blades on the promenade.

Some people cast curious glances at the black limousine, probably hoping to see a Hollywood star getting in or out at any moment.

Then an elegant woman came into the store. She wore a fully-black Gothic outfit, had long flowing raven hair, and wore sunglasses. Everything about her was black, except for her perfect pale skin. She moved powerfully and carefully at the same time. As she approached the detectives' table, she took off her sunglasses and looked at them with bewitching eyes. Bob thought she looked like a young Morticia Addams of *The Addams Family*... or just a raven.

"Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews, I presume."

"Quite right," replied Jupiter.

She nodded briefly and sat down at the table with them. Her face was pretty, but expressionless.

"Um... and you are...?"

"Someone who wants to help you." Her tone made it clear that she wasn't going to answer any more questions about herself.

The First Investigator nodded thoughtfully. "How do you know us?"

"My driver was watching you last night." She glanced at the limousine first, then she nodded to the distant harbour. "Pier 13."

"That was..." Now Bob knew why this man had looked familiar to him. It was the guy he was chasing last night. Why he hadn't manage to recall that earlier!

"And how did you know our names and where I live?" Jupiter asked.

"He followed you. Never mind that you didn't notice. He's a good driver." The hint of a smile flitted across her face, but disappeared again immediately.

"Seems so to me," mumbled Jupiter.

"I'll come straight to the point. Something happened last night that shouldn't have happened. Instead of Skinner Norris, your friend boarded the *Hadden Explorer*, which, as you probably know, is on its way to Micronesia."

“To Makatao, to be exact,” Jupiter said.

“You know surprisingly a lot,” the lady commented.

“So do you,” Jupiter said.

“More than you think,” she added. “Your friend is in danger. But you can help him.”

“We were actually about to notify the police,” said Jupiter.

“I wouldn’t advise you to do that,” she replied objectively. “The police would only make the situation worse.”

“What’s the alternative?” Jupiter asked.

“To trust me. I’m here to make you an offer,” the lady said. “The ship needs about a week to reach the island. In that time, there’s nothing you can do. But in five days, a plane leaves for Pohnpei, the main island of the Federated States of Micronesia. You will take that flight, rent a boat on Pohnpei and go to Makatao to save your friend.”

Bob choked on his milkshake.

“Wait a minute!” said Jupiter. “That... that is going a little fast. We don’t even know who you are!”

“I’m on your side,” she assured them. “That’s all you need to know.”

“What if we do call the police?” Bob asked.

“Then you risk never seeing your friend again.”

Jupiter pinched his eyes together suspiciously. “How do you know all this? Who are you? And whose side are you really on?”

“Like I said, yours.”

“Why should we trust you?” Bob added in.

“Because you won’t like the alternative,” she said. “Take my offer. If you call the police, you’re signing your friend’s death sentence.”

“Death sentence?” Bob almost choked again. “What... what do you mean?”

“That he will die. I thought I made myself clear.”

“With whom do you have contact with? Sphinx? Mr Hadden? The CIA?” Jupiter asked.

Instead of answering, she opened her handbag, pulled out a bundle of bank notes and laid them on the table. “You will need some start-up money to prepare for the journey. I will send you the plane tickets and some more important information in the next few days. Have a nice day.” She got up, nodded goodbye and left.

“Stop! We... we have to...” Jupiter cried. “Uh... How can we contact you?”

“I’ll get back to you,” she said back over her shoulder.

She went to the limousine, got in and the black car drove away slowly.

“Who is she?”

“For the hundredth time, Jelena, we have no idea!” Bob exclaimed.

“And you still want to accept the offer?” Jelena asked. “Even though you have no clue what this woman’s agenda is?”

“Jupiter wants to.”

“And you?”

“I... don’t know. It’s about Pete, you know? We have to help him! But I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

Like last week, Bob and Jelena were sitting at breakfast together. They had decided to make it a tradition—breakfast once a week on Jelena’s balcony. Hopefully it would be a little less serious in the future. Besides, Bob had not been hungry since the night before last. Every bite got stuck in his throat.

“You don’t know what that woman is up to,” Jelena warned. “She’s just using you, can’t you see that?”

“Yes, but we don’t know what for.”

“Exactly.”

“Jupiter says there’s only one way to find out,” Bob said. “We’ll take the tickets and fly to Makatao next week.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I know. We always have been.” Bob tried to defuse the situation with a smile. It failed.

Jelena kept staring at him with a mixture of anger and concern.

“Where has Jupiter’s detective spirit gone? Why doesn’t he do everything possible to find out more about this woman?”

“Because we must be careful in our investigations,” Bob replied.

“Extremely careful. Now that we know the man at the dock wasn’t with the CIA, we can assume the Secret Service isn’t onto us yet. And we’d like to keep it that way. So we have to think carefully every step of the way to keep anyone else from finding out about us. The easiest thing to do would have been to have Inspector Cotta check the licence plates of the limousine. But first of all he would be curious and secondly...”

“No police!”

“Right.”

Jelena sighed and took a sip of coffee. “Even so, you should not go. It’s too dangerous.”

“And what about Pete?” Bob asked.

“What will you tell your parents?”

“That Jupiter, Pete and I spontaneously decided to go camping next week,” Bob said. “For two weeks... To the mountains—where we can’t be reached and we’re not obliged to check in every other day.”

“They’ll call the other two families to check it out.”

“So what?” Bob quipped. “The Crenshaw and Jones families are on vacation. Jupiter will confirm the story. And they’ll think it’s a coincidence that Pete cannot be reached.”

“What if that raven lady is setting you up? Maybe you should call the police.”

“Jelena, we’re going in circles—not to mention the fact that we can’t call the police about the CIA thing. Even if we did, what would we tell them? That our friend is accidentally stuck on a ship to Micronesia and they should please, please free him? Do you think they’ll spread out in a helicopter armada and search half the Pacific for the *Explorer*? After all, it’s no crime to go to Micronesia.”

“You know a whole lot more that you can tell the police,” Jelena contradicted.

“Yes. But nothing solid. We have zero evidence that anything illegal is going on at all. The police would probably only inform their colleagues in Micronesia to keep an eye out for the *Explorer*. That’s about it.” Bob shook his head. “No, Jelena. If there was no other way, we would have informed Cotta. But now there is. We can follow Pete. And we will do so.”

It was clear to Jelena what Bob was thinking. She struggled desperately for arguments, although she knew exactly that the decision was already made.

“We’ll take care of ourselves, don’t worry,” Bob tried to reassure her. “It wouldn’t be the first time we’d been abroad on our own. And we’ve got out of dangerous situations before.” Jelena’s gaze grew colder and colder. “We’ll manage.”

Her eyes were sparking. And suddenly Bob understood what was really going on inside her. Why she was against Jupiter and him taking the flight. He thought she was worried about him. Far from it.

“You... you want to come with us, don’t you?”

“You’re one of the fast ones,” Jelena quipped.

“Jelena, I... I don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

“What a joke! It’s a silly idea, I know it’s a silly idea! It’s impossible! I could still make it to Pohnpei. But after that? On a boat? On an uninhabited island? I hardly believe that hundreds of years ago, the natives thought of asphaltting the beach and building wheelchair accessible paths. Forget it!”

“I’m sorry.” Bob apologized.

“Sorry for what?”

“That you... that you can’t come. But look, it would be dangerous anyway and—”

“A moment ago, you said the opposite,” Jelena snapped.

“I know, but—”

“Just forget about it, okay? Forget about it.”

Silence spread—an uncomfortable silence. Whatever Bob could say now, it would have been the wrong thing to say.

“My destiny,” Jelena finally said.

“Huh?”

“This is my destiny. To never quite fit in.” She smiled sadly.

“This is nonsense, Jelena,” Bob said calmly.

“No, it’s not. It always has been. Anyway, ever since my accident many years ago, I was always excluded. Not expelled... No, not that. Everyone has always been very nice to me. But when it came to weekend trips to the mountains or shopping... or to the disco... then I wasn’t there anymore. But I’ve never been one to keep my head down.”

Bob smiled. “I know.”

“So I took care of other things—music, science, Jupiter Jones. I do things that no one else does... because I’m different from the others. I have to be different. Why? Because I’m excluded... That’s my destiny.” She looked down into the garden, half pensive, half determined. It seemed as if she had forgotten that Bob was there. But then she looked up and smiled. “Are you following me at all?”

“A little, I think.”

“You are going to Micronesia and I will have to stay here for better or worse,” summarized Jelena. “There is nothing more for me to do. And that is what worries me. Do you understand?”

Bob didn’t know what to say. So he just kept nodding.

“Especially since I know that without me you are completely helpless.” She grinned. Bob was relieved. Jelena’s good mood seemed to

have returned.

But suddenly she was serious again. She reached for his hand. “Take care of yourselves, you hear? I want you back in one piece.”

4. The Raven

The midday sun shone directly into Pete's cabin. The porthole was small, but it was enough to heat up the tiny room enormously. Pete lay in his bunk staring at the metal grating above him. He had been on board the *Explorer* for a day now, but had only left the cabin for meals. The rest of the time he had stayed here in the oppressive, swaying confinement.

In the locker, he had found a duffel bag with clothes. Clothes that fit. Maybe they were Skinny's things he had brought on board, or maybe someone else had left them here for Pete to put on.

The Second Investigator had racked his brains countless times about who had knocked him unconscious and put him in the cabin—Skinny or someone from the crew or an unknown third party, someone who had left the ship just before he left? He simply did not get any further on this question.

It was clear that the best way for him to keep up his Skinny Norris role was to stay on deck as little as possible. This would make him even more opaque to everyone else, and at least he could avoid unpleasant questions. But he could not stand the narrowness of the cabin, and he was slightly nauseous. Up there was the open sky, the warm sun and the fresh sea air. And he was hiding in a tiny cabin.

Pete got up and opened the porthole. But the salty air streaming in increased his desire to go on deck.

"Oh, whatever!" He left the cabin and climbed up the steel stairs to the deck of the *Explorer*. Juan was on bridge watch. All the better. Mr Schwartz was probably asleep, having taken over night watch. And Dr Svenson and Mr Olin were sitting in deck chairs, basking in the shadow of the bridge house.

Pete just wanted to stand by the railing and look out at the endless sea, but Dr Svenson had spotted him immediately.

"Hey, Skinner! I see you're finally up here. Why don't you join us?"

"All I really wanted was..."

"Come on over here!" Dr Svenson said.

He guessed that he had no choice. Reluctantly he reached for a deck chair leaning against the wall, unfolded it and sat down.

Maria Svenson straightened up. "What are you doing all this time? Are you hiding from us?"

"I was tired," Pete lied.

"I heard about the conversation yesterday morning," Maria Svenson said. "If it's about Juan—you need not worry. He's an old pessimist who doesn't really like anyone but himself."

"Don't take what he said personally," Olin grumbled and blinked out from under his sunglasses.

"It's okay." Pete looked through the steel railing to water as far as the eye could see.

The sea was quite calm, yet the ship rocked up and down constantly. The *Explorer* cut a dead straight white foaming line into the Pacific Ocean. Nowhere was land to be seen, not a single ship far and wide, as if they were completely alone on the largest ocean on the earth. And Pete was alone among strangers who thought he was someone else. He suddenly felt very lonely and small. Maybe he should have stayed below deck after all.

"What do you think, Skinner?" Dr Svenson asked.

"Huh?"

Dr Svenson laughed. "You still seem really tired. We were just talking about the curse of Makatao. Do you believe in it?"

"I don't know," Pete confessed. "I don't know enough about it."

"So he's not an expert in mythology either," Svenson told Mr Olin. "But that's why we have you." She laughed.

"You'll soon stop laughing," Olin predicted, but without a trace of bad temper. "The Micronesians know why they will not set foot on Makatao."

"But if there are ruins there, they must have been there," Pete said and immediately regretted saying that. Had he already revealed too much about himself?

But Olin replied willingly: "Yes, but that was long ago. When the tomb was built, there were no dead people buried there. Later, the Micronesians turned Makatao into a giant cemetery, and things happened.

"You have to know, their religion is not based on belief in gods like many other peoples. They worship their ancestors. Throughout the oceanic region, ancestor worship is still rife. To honour the dead and not to disturb their rest has been the highest commandment of this people. Anyone who violates it is doomed to die."

Dr Svenson laughed mockingly. “That may be their faith. But in the end it’s just faith, not to say superstition.”

“Oh no, it’s more than that. When the Spaniards settled Micronesia in the sixteenth century, they also wanted to gain a foothold on Makatao. The natives tried to stop them, but in vain. But as it turned out, the Spaniards learned their lesson very quickly by themselves. The ship that had been sent out to establish a settlement on Makatao never returned. When a search party was finally set out to see what was going on, the ship was still at anchor... but there was no trace of the crew.”

“Legends!” Svenson quipped.

“A century later, this region of the Pacific was ruled by pirates,” Olin continued. “Makatao was an ideal pirate’s hideout because of the many legends surrounding the island. But after the first few attempts, the pirates gave up and avoided Makatao altogether. It was said that many people died there mysteriously...”

“Shall I go on, Dr Svenson? There are many other reports from the last centuries, but they all come to the same conclusion—anyone who stayed too long on Makatao disturbed the peace of the dead and was punished. They died or disappeared without a trace.”

“And how... how do you explain this?” asked Pete.

“I’m not on board the *Explorer* to explain anything,” Olin said. “I want to save Professor Phoenix and his crew. Had I known about the first expedition, I would have tried to prevent it. But I learned about it too late. There has been no radio contact with the crew of the *Montana* for ten days. I can only hope that we are not too late.”

“It sounds like you want to get the people off the island as quickly as possible and then get out,” said Dr Svenson.

“I would like that most, yes.”

“But we have a job to do.”

“I know.”

“And we cannot leave until we complete the job,” Dr Svenson concluded.

“I am also aware of that. I won’t stand in your way, if that’s what you mean, Dr Svenson. Don’t worry, I’ll support you in whatever you need to do on the island. But I’ll also see to it that we do it as soon as possible and then leave. No archaeological fuss! No endless digging, no mapping, no deciphering hieroglyphics—”

“The Micronesians had no hieroglyphics.”

“—So good! We won’t do anything that takes time,” Olin continued. “We’re going to do our job and go home. You may think the reports about the Island of Death are legends. I know they’re not.”

The week went by faster than Pete had expected. Dr Svenson, Mr Olin, Mr Schwartz and Juan took turns on the bridge. They calculated the course and steered the ship while the rest of the crew—including Pete—lay lazily on deck or in the cabin. Twice it got a bit stormy, but they avoided the bad weather fronts in time. The rest of the time, the water was almost as smooth as glass in front of them and the *Explorer* ploughed through the ocean at full speed.

In the morning of the fourth day, land came into sight in the north—they passed Hawaii. Everyone stood at the railing and stared spellbound at the volcanic island for half an hour until it disappeared on the horizon. Then the endless Pacific Ocean enclosed them again.

Although Pete didn’t hide in his cabin all day, he didn’t get much closer to the others. They held back, just like him. Maria Svenson was nice to him, but also very curious. She still wanted to know why he joined the expedition but Pete kept his mouth shut. He could also talk to Olin. He was a friendly, open-minded man who protected him from Juan several times. But unfortunately, he talked a lot about Makatao and the curse of the Island of Death, which didn’t exactly improve Pete’s mood.

With Juan, there were still two or three arguments. He didn’t bother to hide his dislike for Pete. The Second Investigator avoided him as much as possible. He was most at ease when Juan was on bridge duty or asleep.

Mr Schwartz kept his distance. He hardly ever talked about himself. If he said anything at all, it was about the mission. But his information remained vague.

As it was, Pete was now sure that nobody knew exactly what the expedition was really about. More and more often, Pete had the disturbing feeling that they expected an answer from him. But he was the one who was looking for answers!

Unlike Jupiter, he was not good in elicitation techniques. The First Investigator would undoubtedly have been able to find out everything about the ship, its cargo, its crew and their task after just one day—and without the others even realizing that they were revealing secrets. But on this point, the four seemed to be in consensus—if Pete did not reveal

anything about himself, they would not do so either. The conversations remained on the surface and after a week, Pete was just as smart as before.

Several times he had thought about going to snoop around the *Explorer*. But because of the shift work, someone was always awake. The risk of being discovered was just too high. If he'd been caught searching the cabins or the cargo bay, his cover would have been blown. He couldn't risk that. Juan would probably have thrown him overboard himself.

Pete was sure that Jupiter would have acted quite differently in this respect as well. But Pete was no hero. And he knew that when in doubt, he was not clever enough to get himself out of a dicey situation. He simply had to wait until they reached Makatao.

"How could you seriously order a seven-dollar sundae?"

"It's not just any sundae. I took the giant Pacific mug on purpose. It fits." Jupiter fished the paper umbrella out of the pineapple and pushed the spoon into the ice cream.

"Well, I can't get a bite." Bob gently rubbed his wrist. Today his bandages had been removed. It was a funny feeling.

"Nervous?" Jupe asked.

"Are you kidding?"

"Me too," the First Investigator confessed. "Why do you think I ordered the ice cream?"

They were sitting at the Santa Monica waterfront—at the same ice cream parlour, same table as the last time, except that it was late afternoon. Bob and Jupiter had had several nerve-racking days of waiting. They had been condemned to inactivity so as not to attract attention. Not even Skinny Norris had contacted them. Under no circumstances did they want to risk being monitored by the CIA. The days passed uneventfully. Until today, the raven lady had called to meet with them. It had been like a starting signal that had torn them out of their lethargy.

Jupiter had immediately decided to take precautions to get on the trail of the raven.

Bob looked at the clock. "To tell you the truth, I hardly expected her to contact us. After all, our flight leaves tonight! Calling just twelve hours before take-off is a bit tight."

"Probably she didn't want to take any risks," Jupiter said and bit into a piece of coconut.

"What if this is all a trap?" Bob asked.

Jupiter let the spoon drop. “Bob,” he said seriously. “We’ve been through all this a thousand times. And we’ve come to the conclusion that we’re getting on that plane. Besides, your parents would be quite surprised if you were back home tomorrow, when you are supposed to be at the mountains with me today.”

“Okay, okay, I’m just saying.” Bob glanced furtively at the dark blue car that was parked near them. There was a man sitting at the wheel reading the newspaper... or at least he pretended to be.

“I hope she comes by car,” Bob continued.

“If she shows up here on foot, Worthington will still go after her,” Jupe said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“Stupidly, this is of no use to us,” Bob remarked. “Even if Worthington figures out who this woman is and where she lives, our plane leaves in a few hours. There is little time to investigate.”

“As agreed, we’ll let Jelena know,” Jupiter said. “She can take over this task while we’re gone. Maybe she’ll have some puzzles solved when we get back.”

“If...” Bob said gloomily. And he looked at his watch again.

“Save it, Bob. Here comes the raven.” He looked up. The limousine that they were in a week ago rolled slowly down the street and stopped.

The raven lady, again dressed fully in black, got out and approached them with elegance. Again only a nod of welcome, and again a penetrating look of her eyes.

“Good evening,” she said. “I’ll make it short. Here are the tickets.” She put a big envelope on the table. “Also, information and maps about Pohnpei, Makatao and the surrounding islands.”

“We took care of that ourselves,” Bob said.

“So you are prepared. So much the better. Your flight leaves in five hours.”

“Wait a minute!” cried Bob. “We don’t know what to do.”

“I thought it was obvious—save your friend.”

“And how?” Bob asked.

“You rent a boat, go out to the island and find him, easy.” From her mouth, it sounded like a recipe for Christmas cookies.

“What if we get in trouble?” Bob continued.

“I make no secret of the fact that you are on your own. But there’s no other way. The only help I can offer you is the money in that envelope. It’s

enough for the return flight... for three people.” She smiled, but her eyes remained cold.

“You still won’t tell us why you’re doing this,” Jupiter suspected. “Or for whom.”

“For you. Just for you. I trust you. And I advise you not to betray my trust. I will find out if you’re really taking that flight tonight.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll go,” Jupiter replied calmly. “We would just like to know a bit more about the background of the whole situation.”

“You’ll know... when the time is right.”

“And when will that be?” Bob asked.

“When you get back... Maybe...” She got up. “Take a taxi to the airport. And don’t forget to be there on time. Good luck.” She nodded and left.

The two detectives looked at her wordlessly.

“I’m not comfortable with this,” mumbled Bob. “I’m not comfortable at all. This woman is cold as ice.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “It’s all just a façade. She was probably just afraid to expose herself.”

Bob shook his head. “No. I don’t think she is afraid of anything. There, now she’s getting into her super sled. Let’s go, Worthington! Show what you can do as the chauffeur of The Three Investigators!”

The limousine pulled up and rolled slowly to the first intersection. There it turned, sped up and disappeared. However, Worthington’s car did not move.

“Hey! What’s going on? Why is he... Why isn’t he following them?” Bob cried. “What? His private car won’t start or what? He should have taken the Rolls-Royce!”

Jupiter dropped his spoon and stared over at Worthington’s car. He signalled to him. Nothing moved. Then the tall chauffeur got out and walked towards them.

“Worthington! Why are you not following that car?” Jupiter asked, surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” The look on Worthington’s face was hard to read. He seemed nervous. Nervous like he’d just made a disturbing discovery.

“Come on, tell us! Why... Why didn’t you go after them?” Bob asked.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Worthington replied.

“What do you mean?” Jupiter asked.

“If I understood you correctly, Jupiter, my mission was to find out where this woman goes, where she lives and who she is.”

“Exactly!” Jupe cried.

“I already have all this information.”

Bob and Jupiter stared at the chauffeur in surprise.

“Excuse me?” Jupe exclaimed. “You... You know her?”

“Indeed I do. I’ve driven her a few times. Not often, since she apparently has her own driver. I still see her occasionally during my other driving assignments.”

“Then... then who is she?” Bob asked.

“Her name is Rachel Hadden—Joseph Hadden’s sister.”

5. Insect Attacks

As the week went by, it was getting warmer. What else could Pete do during the day but get a tan on deck?

Being an athletic person, in the first few days, he felt an excess of energy, which he would have liked to get rid of through exercise. He would have loved to go swimming, but the *Explorer* did not take a single break. And for his attempt to jog on deck, he gave up after a short time. The ship was simply too small.

In the end, he left it at doing nothing. The sluggishness paralyzed him and let time pass him by like a diffuse, uneventful nothing.

This changed abruptly around noon on the seventh day. Pete was dozing on deck. Next to him were Dr Svenson and Mr Schwartz. The archaeologist was asleep, while Schwartz had been engrossed in a book for hours. Juan had gone below deck to sleep. All that could be heard was the monotonous pounding of the ship's engines and the eternal clapping of the waves breaking at the bow. Pete didn't even notice the sounds anymore.

Tuuuuuuuuuuut!

The Second Investigator startled and almost fell out of the deck chair. Dr Svenson was suddenly awake and Mr Schwartz dropped his book.

The ship's horn!

Mr Olin ripped open the bridge door and yelled: "Land ho!"

Instantly, everyone jumped up and ran to the bow of the ship. It was barely visible, but as Pete shielded his eyes from the sun, he saw that a small shape had peeled out of the blurred horizon line. It was not a ship, but something bigger.

"Is that it? Is that Makatao?" Pete asked.

Schwartz shook his head. "No. But it's a sign that we're almost there. That spot up ahead belongs to the Marshall Islands. We must cross it to reach Makatao."

Fascinated, they watched as the island slowly moved closer. But the *Explorer* had taken a course that took a generous curve around the island.

"We don't want to attract attention," Schwartz explained. "I will go to the bridge and monitor the course."

After about an hour, the island behind them had disappeared, but soon the next one appeared. Then another one and another one. It seemed as if they would soon reach some mainland, but Pete knew that this was an illusion. They were still in the middle of the Pacific, a long way off from the Asian coast. But it was good to see at least some spots of land, even though they never got close enough to see the details. Occasionally ships appeared in the far distance.

“Isn’t it fascinating that these islands belong to the US, even though we are so far away from home?” Dr Svenson remarked. Then her face darkened. “However, the Marshall Islands do not have exactly a glorious chapter in the history of the US.”

She pointed to an undefined point in the distance. “Somewhere north of us is Bikini Atoll. Dozens of nuclear tests were conducted there until the 1960s. Thousands of indigenous people had to leave their homes and could not return for a long time because the archipelago is still contaminated. They tried to cleanse the area from nuclear contamination, but it didn’t work. Wells were too radioactive for use and some crops were also dangerous for human consumption.” She shook her head. “What nonsense.”

“Is it really polluted to this day?” Pete echoed.

“Yes, Bikini Atoll is a restricted area. But don’t worry, we’re far enough away.”

Pete breathed again. “Thankfully.”

Dr Svenson turned around. “And to the south lies Kwajalein Island, where there is an American naval base. There the madness continues.”

“What do you mean?” Pete wondered.

“Kwajalein is a military base which is widely used for missile tests of all sorts. But what difference does it make? It remains a business of war. Like I said, it’s crazy. Sheer madness.”

Shuddering, Pete turned away. At first sight, the endless ocean with its countless islands and atolls seemed to be a paradise. But you couldn’t see radioactivity... and no hidden military testing grounds either. This world wasn’t half the paradise he thought it was.

They spent the whole afternoon on deck watching new islands appear and pass by as the *Explorer* glided towards its destination.

Pete fetched a pair of binoculars from the bridge and looked at the small land spots. For the most part, they were accumulations of flat, palm-covered discs that only just protruded from the water level. At some point,

Juan joined them. He too seemed relieved that they were reaching their destination.

Then clouds came up, drifting across the sky like mirror images of the islands and gradually condensing into a grey-blue blanket. The tropical rain was torrential and short. For half an hour, the calm ocean turned into a whipped up surface. Then suddenly it was all over again, the clouds cleared away and there was only a slight mist in the air.

The sun was already low in the sky when Olin pressed the horn a second time and shouted loudly: "Target ahead!"

Pete immediately looked through the binoculars. Right in front of them a mountain had risen on the horizon. It wasn't much more than a blurred spot, but the closer they came, the more the outline stood out from the hazy surroundings. It was different from the other islands. Not a flat strip of sand with palm trees, but a mountain.

It was covered in fog. The fallen rain evaporated in thick wisps and hid the island behind a curtain of white-grey air. Only its shape was visible—a cone, almost perfectly symmetrical, as if it had been designed by an architect. Finally, Pete realized what he was seeing—a volcano! He remembered what Mr Olin had told him a few days ago. Almost all the Pacific islands were of volcanic origin.

A light wind came up and suddenly dispersed the fog that had clung to the island. Lush, full, vivid green covered the entire island. Here and there, rugged rocks rose from the trees and painted dark brown spots into them. The volcanic rock glittered wet. When the sun stood behind the island and conjured up an aura of glowing mist around the volcano, a shiver ran down Pete's spine. So that was it—Makatao, the Island of Death. It was both scary and beautiful.

In the meantime, they were close enough to see with the naked eye how the waves were foaming at the rocks that plunged steeply into the water. A small flock of birds rose from the dense trees, circled the top of the mountain once and disappeared on the other side.

"Beautiful," said Dr Svenson. "A paradise."

Pete noticed that for half an hour, nobody had spoken a word. He shivered. It was cold in the shade. But that was not all. When he heard the word 'paradise', he remembered that what he saw were only appearances. There were secrets hidden on this island that no one could see.

The Island of Death... For Pete, this name had a double meaning. It wasn't just the curse that was associated with the island. Above all, it was

the uncertainty that terrified him. He had no idea of what to expect. He was an unknown person—one who had hidden behind a name that wasn't his. But now he had to come out of hiding. He had a job to do without even knowing what it was. The journey was over. On Makatao, the masks would fall. And his would be the first.

The *Hadden Explorer* was anchored some fifty metres away from the shore. Mr Schwartz and Juan lowered the motor-powered dinghy, and the five of them got in. In this first trip to the shore, everyone only brought their backpacks and sleeping bags. Mr Schwartz had decided that they would only get the equipment off the ship tomorrow.

Very soon, they reached the beach. They all helped to pull the dinghy up the beach a bit and tied the mooring rope to a rocky outcrop so that it wouldn't be dragged out to sea at high tide. Pete's sneakers sank into the wet sand and left prints that quickly filled with water. He hastily took a few steps up the beach to escape the next wave.

The beach was small. After about thirty metres, it was enclosed on both sides by rugged, reddish brown rocks. And twenty metres from the water was the jungle. The few palm trees that had taken a place on the sandy surface were replaced by huge, dark green deciduous trees that rose before them like an impenetrable wall. The small bay was almost a prison. But it was the only place where one could enter the island. The rest of Makatao's coast consisted of steep cliffs and repelling rocks.

Involuntarily, Pete went through an icy cold shower. He was on Makatao.

"Spooky, isn't it?" Dr Svenson let her gaze wander over the sea, over the rocks and the jungle. There was a rustling between the trees. They looked up, but saw nothing.

"It's much scarier than you'll ever realize," said Olin, who had appeared next to them.

"What do you mean?" Pete asked.

He beckoned. "You'll find out."

Before Pete could think about what Olin was talking about, Schwartz and Juan approached them.

Mr Schwartz said: "It'll be dark soon. Now, we should start looking for Professor Phoenix and the others. The sooner we find them, the better. I have little desire to wander into the jungle after dark."

“It’s not that big an island,” said Maria Svenson. “We will find them quickly. They must have set up camp near the tomb. And it’s at the top of the mountain. We shouldn’t miss it.”

“We have to go all the way up there?” Pete asked and looked at the top of the volcano.

“You got a problem with that?” Juan snapped.

“No, I—”

“No discussions!” Schwartz said firmly. “We’re going up there immediately!”

He took a bottle of mosquito repellent from his backpack and rubbed himself with it. “The jungle is full of critters. The repellent won’t stop them all, but without it we’d be bitten half to death within an hour.”

After everyone had rubbed themselves, Schwartz stepped to the edge of the jungle and detached his machete from his belt. “Let’s go!”

“Do you want to cut through the jungle?” asked Dr Svenson.

“I intended to, yes.” Schwartz replied.

She smiled derisively. “Let’s just go this way.” She bent over some giant fern frond. Behind it was a path paved with stone slabs. The stones were worn out and weathered, many had slipped from their original position and distorted the path into bizarre curves. But it clearly led to the top of the mountain and was almost free of undergrowth and vines. Everyone was amazed.

“Do you think that the forgotten people have always made their way through the jungle?” Dr Svenson asked, and was the first to enter the path.

Pete had been uncomfortable with the island from the first second. But when he went into the jungle, it got really scary. The already weak daylight was dimmed under the dense canopy of leaves so much that he could hardly see anything. And what he saw was green—green as far as the eye could see. Green tendrils grew up gnarled tree trunks. Green ferns and mosses completely covered the ground. Bushes, shrubs, fronds, perennials—they were covered on all sides by lush, lively, hungry green. Here and there, it was blasted by bright yellow or red spots—exotic flowers and blossoms that Pete had never seen before. They shone with such an intense glow and exuded such an intense smell that Pete felt completely numbed by scents in between.

Everything smelled. The trees, the flowers, the earth. The scents were carried up by the evaporating rainwater and crashed over them like a warm wave. Life literally jumped at them as they followed Dr Svenson in a

single file, who climbed the mountain with brisk steps along the stone path. Sometimes they came too close to some colourful birds. Loudly screeching, they fluttered up, poked through the canopy of leaves and disappeared.

The path rose and soon it went steeply uphill. The slabs of rock turned into stairs. In some places, they almost had to crawl to get ahead. The path was wet and slippery. More than once Pete almost fell.

The air was warm and humid and within a few minutes, he was sweating on his forehead. He only carried his backpack and not anything heavy. Even that, he found the climb more strenuous than a full day at the gym. And the insects—yes, there were insects everywhere. They swarmed around the Second Investigator in a dense cloud and more than once he caught two or three fat mosquitoes at the same time when he went after them.

Fearfully, he looked out for larger animals—spiders and snakes. Hadn't there been some movement in the bushes? Didn't something scurry across the muddy ground there? Pete saw a bright green lizard scurrying away, but he was sure he was being watched from the branches by a thousand curious eyes—eyes that he did not see himself, as the animals had adapted perfectly to their environment. This island was bursting with life—blood-thirsty life.

“Ouch!” Pete was looking for a mosquito that had just sat on his arm and bit him.

Little by little, the ground became rockier, and the trees receded. And then, all of a sudden, they were up. The sun was just setting, but it was still bright enough to take in the view they were offered. They stood at the edge of the volcanic crater. In front of them, the rock dropped like a huge funnel into a valley—a valley as big as a sports stadium.

Glowing lava had once bubbled down there. But even now the crater was not empty. It looked as if it had served as a playground for a giant a thousand years ago—a giant who had simply left his building bricks lying around.

Large grey boulders rose into the air. Weathered walls, which had perhaps once enclosed rooms, now stood scattered around, forming a bizarre labyrinth.

There were open spaces, narrow passageways, archways leading to nowhere, and black holes in the rock—perhaps entrances to underground chambers... or hiding places. Some of the boulders had once been richly

ornamented, but over the centuries, wind and rain had weathered the rock so badly that not much of its original form could be seen.

Everything was densely covered with lichens and mosses. Life had covered this man-made place like a thick green blanket. Ferns crowded close together in every corner, arm-thick tendrils held the boulders and walls tightly clasped.

“The tombs of Makatao,” Dr Svenson said. “Who would have thought they were still well-preserved in such good condition!”

Well-preserved? To an archaeologist, it might look that way. For Pete, they were completely destroyed. It was a complex of ruins, whose original purpose was probably only known hundreds of years ago.

“All right,” Schwartz said firmly. “We’ll take care of the tombs later. Right now we must find Professor Phoenix.”

Olin cleared his throat. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t see a camp anywhere around here. No tents, no equipment, not even the remains of a camp fire. Didn’t you say the group had settled near the ruins?”

Now everyone searched the area with their eyes. Olin was right. There was nothing to indicate that even a human had been here in the last thousand years.

“And that is not all,” Olin continued. “It also seems to have escaped your notice that we found no trace of the *Montana* when we circumnavigated the island. The ship should have been anchored somewhere. But it was not. Wherever Professor Phoenix’s crew is, they’re not on this island. Makatao is deserted.”

The last bit of sun sank behind the horizon. Since they were only a few hundred kilometres from the equator, the light disappeared almost abruptly. The night reached out to the volcano like a giant hand and enveloped it in darkness.

From one minute to the next, it was dark on the Island of Death.

6. The Magic Circle

As the morning dawned, suddenly there was no longer just water below them. Bob opened his eyes and looked out the window.

Under feathery clouds, the sea glittered in the rising sun. There were small islands everywhere. They looked like the flowing patterns of a glass marble. The deep blue of the ocean changed to a strong night blue around the atolls and finally turned to turquoise and green tones interspersed with white streaks. In this blurred blaze of colour, the islands looked like punched-out dark spots.

Bob elbowed the First Investigator in the ribs. “Jupe, wake up! You have to see this!”

“Do you mind?” mumbled Jupiter. “I finally managed to sleep!” He rubbed his eyes. He had had a horrible night.

After Worthington’s unmasking of the raven lady, they went back to Headquarters. From there, they called Jelena and told her everything. Then they went to the airport. But when Jupiter saw the plane, he wanted to go back. He had expected a jumbo jet, a normal passenger plane. Instead, there was a twin-engine machine made of grey steel on the runway, which looked as if it had been beamed there directly from the Second World War.

And that’s exactly what the last few hours had felt like. Although they had not been caught in a storm, the flight had been bumpy and loud. The engines had thundered, stuttered and sputtered, they had fallen into air pockets over and over again. Jupiter had felt like he was on a roller coaster ride that had lasted all night. It had been hell. Only in the early hours of the morning had he found some sleep. And now he was rudely awakened by Bob.

Jupiter looked out the window. Bob was right. The islands passing underneath them were a magnificent sight. Bob eagerly took some photos.

“We’re almost there, the plane is on the descent,” he said.

An announcement was made over the loudspeakers: “Passengers please fasten your seat belts and stop smoking.” There was no stewardess. And when Jupiter buckled the seat belt around his stomach and pulled it

for a test, he doubted that this safety device would be of any use to him in an emergency.

He looked around. The plane only had twenty-four seats, and only half of which were occupied. The other passengers also looked pretty tired. Jupiter wondered whether one of them was perhaps a spy. Rachel Hadden had announced that she would continue watching them. How far would she go with that? None of his fellow passengers looked suspicious in any way. But, of course, that meant nothing.

“I think that’s Pohnpei,” Bob said, pointing out the window. A big island had appeared beneath them—the biggest island yet. It was almost completely covered by jungle, but there were small settlements along the coast. The plane circled the island and approached it from the north. Now the largest town, Kolonia, was directly in front of them. The airfield was located on a small offshore island, which was connected to the main island by a bridge.

Five minutes later, the plane rolled over the bumpy runway after a rough landing. It was not much more than a runway. The asphalt had been torn up in many places and only patched up in a makeshift way.

“For goodness’ sake, where did we land?” Bob asked as he climbed out of the plane. There was no shuttle bus or anything like that, but that wasn’t necessary either. The airport building was only fifty metres away. It was about the size of a small supermarket.

While they were waiting for their luggage, Jupiter checked the possible return flight times to be on the safe side. The next flight to Los Angeles was in three days. If everything went well, they should soon be going back home.

They left the airport and went over the bridge into the town, located in the north of the Pohnpei island. Bob noted: “Kolonia has about five thousand inhabitants and it is supposed to be the largest town here. This is even smaller than Rocky Beach!”

Kolonia consisted essentially of a main road—a road of trampled red clay. Everywhere there were small, round houses with pointed roofs made of dried, grey grass. In between some brick buildings were hotels, shops and tourist information offices. Just south of this small area of civilization, the jungle spread out. There were volcanic mountains covered with a dark green splendour of plants. The trees reached down into the town.

It was still early in the morning, but still many people were already around the town. Women in long, colourful robes and with pitch-black hair

walked past them and curiously looked at the new arrivals. Some children ran happily towards them, shouting something in a foreign language and running on.

“Didn’t you say that everyone here speaks English, Jupe?”

“They do. But the Micronesian languages are also still common.”

A dented Jeep drove right past them. The dark-skinned man at the wheel with the exotic-looking face grinned at them and shouted:

“*Kaselehlia!*”

Bob smiled. “That’s great. Everybody is nice to us. It’s almost as if they were expecting us.”

The First Investigator shrugged. “We are the attraction of the day. Probably there are no more than ten visitors to Kolonia a day.”

“What was that man shouting?”

“*Kaselehlia*. This is the ultimate greeting, farewell and in-between greeting in Micronesia, suitable for any time of day or night. In our case, it was probably ‘welcome’.”

Kolonia was quickly explored. It consisted of little more than a few shops and small guest houses, whose owners approached Jupiter and Bob every few metres on the street to ask if they were looking for a room. In the beginning, they had categorically refused all offers. But finally Bob said: “Maybe we should get a room after all, Jupe. I could fall asleep standing up.”

“And what about Pete?” Jupe asked.

“It’s no good to Pete if we arrive at Makatao completely tired,” Bob said. “According to the map that Rachel Hadden gave us, there are still a few hours of boat ride until we reach the island. I guarantee you I’ll be knocked out by then.”

Jupiter wrestled with himself for a moment. “All right. You’re right. Let’s get a few hours’ sleep. But I want to leave today!”

They just stopped in the middle of the road and waited. Given their travelling bags, it could not take too long before they were approached again.

True enough. A boy came by, barefoot and dressed with nothing more than a colourful shawl he had wrapped around his waist. He had half a dozen pigs in tow, which followed him tamely. They had already seen several pigs on the road. They seemed to be common pets on Pohnpei. He

approached them, grinned happily and cried: "*Kaselehlia!* Are you looking for a room?"

Jupiter nodded, which made the boy grin even wider.

"Come on!" Jupe said and five minutes later, they were in front of four round huts.

There was a man sitting on a chair. He wore a strange green wreath of leaves on his head. In front of him was a blanket with coconut shells spread out on it. The shells had strange faces artistically carved on them. He was working on another coconut shell with a knife when he noticed the two detectives.

"Ancestral images," he said proudly. "Would you like to buy some? They bring good luck!"

"No, thanks," Bob said. "We want a place to sleep."

"Ah, all the better!" He jumped up, threw his carving in the grass and led them to one of the little huts. "How long?"

"Just for today," Bob replied and the man seemed disappointed. "We'll be leaving tonight. I wonder if you could tell us where we could rent a boat."

He smiled again. "Of course! At my brother's place, he has a couple of boats down at the beach. Do you need a guide? He can guide you anywhere."

Jupiter and Bob looked at each other, then Jupiter decided to give it a try. "Sure. We want to go to Makatao."

The man involuntarily took a half step back. Then he smiled again, but much more timidly. "You can't go to Makatao."

"Why not?" Bob asked.

"Makatao is a sacred island. It is forbidden. No one is allowed there."

"And why not?" Bob asked again.

"Because that is where our ancestors rest. No one must disturb their rest."

"We have no intention of disturbing their rest," Jupiter said.

The man smiled. "No one goes there. It's forbidden." It was obvious that he had no interest in a discussion.

"Really nobody?" Jupiter remarked.

He shook his head. "It is the law. The island remains uninhabited. No trespassing."

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders apparently indifferently. "All right. Then we'll just pick another place to go."

But the man was not fooled. “Don’t get the idea of renting a boat and going to Makatao without a guide. It’s forbidden, understand? Besides, without a guide you’d be hopelessly lost. The island is not easy to find. You are Americans—unlike us.” He smiled proudly, but now there was a trace of less warmth and friendliness in his smile.

A moment later, the two friends they dragged their bags into the cabin.

“I guess he saw right through you,” Bob muttered.

“You can say that again,” Jupe remarked.

Pete woke up from a noise. It was a distant scraping... or was it just the rustling of the trees? When he opened his eyes, the noise stopped. He blinked. The sun had just risen, but it was as suddenly bright as it had become dark the night before.

The others were still asleep. They had snuggled down in their sleeping bags among the ruins on the mossy stone slabs. It had been pretty much the most uncomfortable night Pete had ever experienced. The ground was hard and it had become cold quickly.

The past night, he had been hungry and thirsty. And every time he was about to fall asleep, he heard an eerie noise nearby that tore him out of his twilight state with a touch of panic. A scraping, a scratching, a rustling... The night was full of eerie noises. He had wished for nothing more than to return to the ship. But it had already been too dark for that.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep. But he didn’t feel particularly fit when he stretched on the ground and then slowly rose. He looked around. In daylight, the ruins were a little less scary, but still scary enough to make him shiver.

He was now standing in the middle of a cluster of old wall remains, crumbling figures and stone blocks that had been erected without a clearly discernible function. But what frightened him was what he could not see—the countless nooks and crannies, the ledges and holes, the thousand places where someone—or something—could hide and watch them.

There! It was that scraping noise again! It was like stone scraping against stone, and it was not too far away. He quickly got the hang of it. Svenson, Schwartz, Juan, Olin—they were all still asleep. But then who had made that noise? Or what?

Reluctantly, Pete stepped out of the circle of figures in sleeping bags and went around the next corner. There was nobody there. He listened.

Now nothing could be heard. Still, Pete had the feeling that someone or something was there... or that he was being watched.

He walked past several large and partially-buried boulders. There were too many corners and ledges, and too many hiding places. He couldn't help thinking about the curse of the Island of Death. Maybe there was some dangerous predatory animal living here, for which every visitor to Makatao was a welcome change on the menu.

In this rock labyrinth, a whole pack of tigers or lions could hide unnoticed. Had the crew of the *Montana* fallen victim to them? Were there even tigers or lions in Micronesia in the first place? Pete shivered. This place gave him the creeps. Maybe he'd better go back and wake the others.

The Second Investigator circled a small rock formation—and stopped abruptly. There was a cigarette butt on the ground. It might have been lying here for days or weeks. But somehow it looked fresh, not yet softened by the rain.

When Pete bent down, everything happened very quickly. A figure jumped out from behind a rock, pushed Pete to the ground and pressed him with his back against the stone tiles.

Before Pete even knew what was happening to him, the cold barrel of a gun pressed against his forehead. Above him crouched a young man with confused brown hair. He was only a few years older than Pete.

"Not a sound! Or else you're dead!"

Pete's pulse was racing. Within seconds, he played through all the possibilities—escape, fight, call for help—it was all futile. The weapon on his forehead was more than obvious.

The man's eyes sparkled coldly at Pete. "Are there others here?"

Pete nodded.

"Where?"

"They... they're over there," Pete stammered.

"How many?"

"Four," Pete said. "Who are you?"

"Shut up! What are you doing here?"

Pete pondered feverishly. Could he tell the stranger who they were? Maybe he was one of Professor Phoenix's group... or maybe not. "We're looking for somebody."

"Who?"

"Professor Phoenix." Now he had either accomplished or ruined their mission.

The man narrowed his eyes and stared suspiciously at Pete. “What’s your name?”

“Pe... Pitt... Please, could you put the gun away first?” Pete stammered.

“I want to know your name!”

“Skinny Norris. So... Skinner, actually.”

Whoever this guy was, it was quite possible that he knew Skinny and his cover would have been blown at that moment.

“Never heard of you,” the man said. “Who else is with you?”

“Mr Schwartz. And Dr Svenson. And...”

“Schwartz?” He finally put the gun down and stood up. “Why didn’t you say so?”

He reached out his hand. Pete hesitated for a moment, but then grabbed it and let himself be helped up. The man held his hand.

“I am Albert. That’s a terrible name. You’d better call me Al. We thought you’d never get here. What took you guys so long? Because we were out of fresh water. We already had to go to Pohnpei once to refill our supplies. The rest of the time we waited here for you. We couldn’t get in touch via radio, because the batteries failed. It was dreadfully boring here. There was not much to explore, or let’s say—without equipment, our hands are tied. Otherwise, we would certainly have had a lot to do. It’s a pretty exciting thing, this whole discovery, huh?”

“Uh, I’m... uh... not quite sure.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Since last night.”

“What? That long? Oh, my goodness. You must have arrived right after my last inspection,” Al said. “Did you spend the night here? Why didn’t you make yourself noticed?”

“We... we thought the island was deserted. We haven’t seen the *Montana* anywhere.”

“Oh, I see. The ship is hidden in a bay on the east side of the island. Hard to see from the sea. We wanted to remain undiscovered.”

“Besides, we didn’t know where you were,” Pete said.

Al frowned. “Didn’t Hadden tell you that?”

“No.”

“Well, let me show you,” Al said. “I have to wake up the others anyway. They’ll be happy you’re finally here. Come along.”

Pete hesitated. Shouldn't he have told Dr Svenson and Olin? On the other hand, once he put his gun away, Albert seemed quite all right. So why not?

He followed him through the labyrinth of ruins to a small area with an altar-like cuboid in the middle. Pete could remember the thing. During their short walk in the evening, he had seen it with the light of the torch. Mystical symbols and faces were carved onto the rock. Most were half weathered. Also clearly visible was a large circle with strange symbols on it.

"You will be amazed," Al promised. "You see that symbol over there? I call it the magic circle. Now watch!"

He knelt down and placed his palm on the magic circle and pushed. The circle disappeared into the base. Something crunched. And suddenly, the altar moved to the side loudly and exposed a dark opening.

"Wow! So that's the scraping sound I woke up from!"

"This has been the entrance to our new home for two and a half weeks," Al proudly announced. Curious, Pete stepped forward and took a look into the small hole in the ground. A stone staircase led into the depths and darkness. "Come on, we must hurry."

"You want to go down there?"

"Didn't I just say that? The altar door closes again after about one minute. So get down!"

Now Pete got scared, but it was too late to back out. Carefully he descended the first steps.

"Hurry up!" Al called out to him.

He descended into darkness. Cold struck him like a massive wall. Al was close behind him. Then the eerie crunching of stone on stone sounded again, the cone of daylight became smaller and with a muffled thud, the altar door closed above them.

7. The Scar-Faced Beggar

“I can’t see anything!” That was a redundant remark. But Pete didn’t dare take another step forward.

“Just go to the bottom of the stairs,” Al advised. “There’s a flashlight on the last step.”

Carefully he groped his way further. At any moment he expected that the next step would lead nowhere... Or perhaps the steps triggered a secret mechanism and shot poisonous arrows from the wall, and then a gigantic boulder rolled towards him—like Indiana Jones.

But then he got to the bottom of the stairs, felt around the floor and found the flashlight, and switched it on. It was like Indiana Jones, really. He was in a long, narrow tunnel that had been cut directly into the volcanic rock. The ceiling was right above his head, the walls so close together that no two people could have fit in the tunnel side by side. It was oppressive and eerie. Al squeezed by next to him to a strange structure sticking out of the wall.

Two stone jugs were attached to levers, also made of stone, which disappeared into the wall. One of them was full of sand, the other empty. Al lifted the full jug out of its lever and poured all its contents into the empty one. Then he attached the now-empty jug back on the lever.

“What are you doing? What is this?” Pete asked.

“It’s the door opening mechanism. The altar door moves by an ingenious mechanism concealed in the wall,” Al explained. “Somehow it works with weights, I didn’t quite get it at first, but let me explain it to you.

“Up there at the altar, I opened the door by pushing the magic circle. Here, there is another magic circle,” Al pointed to the circular indentation on the wall with the same strange symbols as the one on the altar. “This is for opening the door from here—the inside. Whenever the door is opened, whether from the inside or the outside, it will close by itself after about one minute. However, in order to open it the next time, you have to pour the sand from one jug to the other.

“Actually you can do this weight transfer procedure anytime, but there is a catch here in that it can only be performed at this very location. You will have no problem doing it if you come in. But if you want go out, after pushing the magic circle here, you have to remember do the weight transfer procedure before you go out, else, you cannot come back in. Understand?”

Pete was not sure if he had understood everything, but he nodded as a precaution.

“Good,” Al said with a smile. “Just remember to do the weight transfer procedure before you go out.”

“Okay,” Pete said. “And now what?”

“Let’s visit Anne and Professor Phoenix. Do you know them?”

“No.”

For a moment, Al remarked with a frown: “You don’t know very much about the mission, do you?”

“None of us do,” Pete evaded. “Hadden hasn’t told anyone anything.”

Al shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t be alarmed at Professor Phoenix. He’s very nice, but he looks a little scary.”

The Second Investigator was still trying to figure out what Al meant when he took the flashlight out of his hand and went ahead. Pete hurried to follow. The tunnel went straight ahead for a short distance, then it widened into a large, round chamber about ten metres in diameter. A candle flickered lonely on the floor. The ceiling arched over them and was supported in the middle by a stone column carved with eerie grinning faces.

Another tunnel led out of the chamber. In the glow of the small flame, Pete recognized two curled up figures slowly digging themselves out of their sleeping bags.

A young woman raised her head sleepily, saw Al, saw Pete—and flinched.

“Don’t panic, Anne. Just company. This is Skinner—one of Schwartz’s guys. They’ve finally arrived.”

Anne didn’t seem to listen to him at all. “Professor!” she cried. “Wake up!”

The movement was so fast that Pete hardly noticed it.

Suddenly something shot out of the sleeping bag and pounced on him. A second later, Pete was pressed against the wall, a forearm pressed against his throat and a horrible grimace sparkled at him angrily.

“Arrgh!” Pete cried out! Not only because of the tremendous fright he had received. Not just because of the painful pressure on his neck. But mainly because of the hideous face that hovered thirty centimetres away from him, staring at him.

The man was perhaps in his mid-forties. Pete couldn’t have appreciated it that much, because his face was disfigured. A thick scar ran from the left corner of his mouth across his cheek, ran through his eye and disappeared above his forehead in his greying and dishevelled hair. His left eye was blind and was strangely distorted by the scarring. He had an unkempt beard and the corner of his mouth was raised, baring his teeth like a tiger. Pete couldn’t help but thought that he looked like a scar-faced beggar. He could not take his eyes off the deformed part of the man’s face.

“Professor! Take it easy! He’s a friend! He is with Sphinx!” Al shouted. It took the Second Investigator a moment to realize what Al said.

“I don’t know him!” growled Professor Phoenix. “And I know almost everyone at Sphinx. Who is he?”

“S... Skinner Norris,” said Pete. “I don’t really belong to Sphinx. Mr Hadden sent me on this trip.”

“Why?”

There it was again. The question that was not to be asked. The question that brought Pete to the edge of the abyss faster than anything else.

“Why don’t you let him go first, Professor Phoenix,” Al came to his aid.

Slowly the pressure on Pete’s throat eased.

“Where are the others?” the professor growled.

“Upstairs. They’re still asleep.” Al quickly told the professor the rest of the story.

Slowly Phoenix calmed down and took a step back.

Only now Pete was able to look at the man closely and not just stare at his terrible scar. He was tall and strong and had sun-tanned skin. The right side of his face looked perfectly normal. In fact, a smile was now even playing around his mouth, but it was destroyed by the distortion on the left side.

He returned to his sleeping place, picked something up from the floor and slipped it over his face—a black eye patch. Now he looked like a pirate, but Pete preferred that a thousand times over the Phantom of the Opera.

“Sorry I frightened you. But I’m a very cautious person,” Professor Phoenix said as he reached his hand out to Pete. When the Second Investigator grabbed it, he realized he was still shaking.

“And this is Anne Fox, my assistant. It’s her first mission.”

The petite woman, who had been in the background the whole time, nodded at Pete. She said nothing, but continued to observe him with an undefined mixture of fear and suspicion.

Pete felt that he had to say something before the professor asked unpleasant questions again. He let his gaze wander across the chamber. “So this is your discovery.”

Phoenix gave a sinister smile. “This is a prayer chamber. Here the dead were honoured for the last time. One prayed to the ancestors that they would take the deceased in with them. Afterwards, the bodies were taken to their final resting place.” He pointed to the tunnel leading out of the chamber. “At least that’s what we think. This tomb is unique in the world. The Micronesian natives brought their dead here from all the surrounding islands to pass them on to their ancestors.”

“Impressive,” Pete just managed to say something.

Phoenix nodded. “Yes. There had been archaeologists here before us. Until the Federated States of Micronesia declared the island a sanctuary and banned anyone from coming here. What you see here is not the real discovery.”

Pete frowned. “Really?”

“Hadden didn’t tell them anything,” Al joined the conversation. “Skinner says none of them know why they’re even here.”

“Is this true?” Phoenix turned to Pete.

“Hadden didn’t tell me a single word,” Pete answered truthfully, hoping Phoenix would not follow up.

“But I hope you brought your equipment,” Phoenix said.

“I... I think so,” Pete stammered. “It’s in our ship.”

That seemed to be enough for him. Professor Phoenix rubbed his hands. “All right. Then I suggest we greet the rest of our guests now, have breakfast together and then get to work. All the equipment must be hauled up here. It’s gonna be a tough day.”

The professor was on his way out. Al and Anne followed him and it didn’t seem as if anyone would care to show Pete the rest of the tomb. But the Second Investigator couldn’t help but muttered: “What’s your discovery, then?”

Phoenix turned around and gave out a laugh. “You’ll see... later.”

Bob’s shoes squeaked with every step. His T-shirt and pants were soaked. And he avoided taking a closer look at the backpack hanging over his shoulder. Probably their contents were completely ruined.

He looked up. The clouds circled the mountain tops of the island and seemed to have no desire to be carried away by the wind. And all this was so because Jupiter had made the mistake of mentioning Makatao.

“I can’t believe it!” Bob said. “How can we gain such a bad reputation in such a short time?”

“This is disastrous,” Jupiter remarked aptly. “Probably the brother of our landlord is the mayor’s best friend, the brother-in-law of the police chief and the cousin by marriage to the priest. And everybody in the whole town knows that they can’t rent a boat to the two young tourists with the American accent who just came here... because they’re about to desecrate the holiest of all sanctuaries—the legendary island of Makatao.”

“You summed it up nicely, Juve,” Bob remarked as they were trotting along a coastal road heading east.

They had just slept five hours the night before. Then they spent the whole morning trying to rent a boat in Kolonia and had been turned down by every single boat rental company. Finally, they decided to leave Kolonia to try their luck in a neighbouring village or town.

Pohnpei was beautiful. Bob usually had an eye for the fascinating nature around him, but not at the moment. He did not see the steep rocks rising from the sea, he did not see the jungle, and he did not see the flock of brightly coloured parrots sitting in the dense crown of a tree at the side of the road. Bob saw only clouds and rain and heard his wet shoes squeaking on the asphalt.

Of course, not a single car drove by that could have picked them up. Who on this island would want to drive anywhere? Why should they be lucky for once?

At least the rain was pleasantly warm and not cold like that in California. And so Bob trotted on with his eyes fixed on the wet road. It was almost like being in the shower.

The sweat ran in streams from Pete’s forehead. The air was so humid that he felt like he was breathing water. It had just rained. Now the moisture

rose from the ground in grey clouds, enveloping the jungle in a haunting mist.

The rope he was clutching tightly cut into his palm. But if he let go now, Anne, who was behind him, would be hit by the box. For hours, they had been transporting the load of the *Explorer* up to the tomb. Pete still had no idea what were in the boxes. Most of them were small enough to be carried or dragged by either one or two persons, but they were heavy.

They had climbed down and back up the volcano several times. Nature kept making the path difficult for them. More than once, someone stumbled over a root, got caught in a vine or slipped on the wet stone steps and dropped the cargo they were carrying on their back. But miraculously, everything remained intact.

Finally, it was the last load. The *Explorer* was unloaded. Pete was looking forward to the meal that Dr Svenson was going to prepare while they made the last hike up. He didn't care about what they were going to eat—he was just hungry.

After a long while, the trees finally retreated and they dragged the last box down into the crater, which now looked even more bizarre than before. Between the ruins, there were now crates, boxes and bags everywhere.

And in all this chaos, Maria Svenson squatted over a gas cooker and poured canned vegetables into a huge, bubbling drip. It was a crazy mix of a mystical place of worship, a warehouse and a camping site.

Fifteen minutes later, the meal was ready. Everyone lunged at it greedily, settled down with their plates at the nearest place and ate in silence. While Pete spooned his soup, he watched the people around him. It was amazing how quickly the atmosphere changed after the two groups had met.

When the first joy that everyone was fine had vanished, one thing became clear very quickly—Professor Phoenix was the new leader. Everyone respected him, and not only because of his frightening appearance. Mr Schwartz willingly submitted to him, and Juan suddenly seemed much more tame. Albert and Anne were loyal to Phoenix anyway. Only Maria Svenson did not allow herself to be disturbed by the authority radiated by Professor Phoenix.

Al sat down next to Pete. “That guy is pretty weird,” he said, nodding to Olin, who was sitting far enough away not to hear them. “What’s his name again?”

“Olin.”

“Right. Going on and on about the island’s curse and that we should leave as soon as possible. He’s already in trouble with Professor Phoenix. Why did he even come along? What’s his job on the expedition?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? What do you know anyway, Skinner?” Al burst out. “Do you have any idea about anything?”

Pete nearly choked on the soup. He could barely suppress the urge to cough. He continued to eat as calmly as possible and simply ignored Al’s remark. “What’s the professor’s stand on the curse?”

“Of course Phoenix laughed at Olin,” Al said. “He’s a very down-to-earth person and not such a weirdo.”

Pete didn’t think Olin was a crazy person, but he didn’t let on that he was. “So you didn’t see any weird things happening?”

“Well... it is spooky here... especially because we sleep downstairs to avoid the mosquitoes and the rain,” Al explained. “We practically sleep in the middle of a tomb. Sometimes it gives me the creeps. But nothing really happened yet.”

Pete wanted to reply but at that moment, Professor Phoenix stood up and raised his voice: “Now that you have finally arrived, and we have unloaded the equipment from the *Explorer*, hopefully everyone has rested and eaten enough. I think the time has come to show you why you are here.”

A murmur went through the small group. “Please come with me,” the professor instructed.

Nobody need to be told twice. Professor Phoenix pushed the magic circle and the altar moved to the side. He had earlier showed the newcomers how to operate the altar door opening mechanism and also brought them to the prayer chamber. The professor then descended the stairs, closely followed by Mr Schwartz, Dr Svenson, Olin, Juan and Pete.

“Four weeks ago, Mr Hadden told us to come to Makatao, explore the burial site and get him some souvenirs,” Phoenix said as he walked through the tunnel. “But when we arrived here and finally discovered the entrance to this chamber, we found far more than we expected. We immediately sent a radio message telling Hadden about our discovery. He replied that he would send reinforcements as soon as possible in the form of the necessary equipment and some specialists.”

They crossed the prayer chamber and entered the second tunnel. It was as narrow and low as the first. The only light source was Professor Phoenix's flashlight.

"I don't suppose Mr Hadden gave you any details to keep the matter secret," the professor continued. "To be honest, we're not entirely sure what we've discovered either. But together, we shall solve the mystery."

The tunnel took a bend and widened into a smaller room. The walls were painted with eerie images, similar to those carved into the stone column in the prayer chamber. But Pete paid little attention to them. His gaze was fixed on what was on the opposite wall. Something he had never dreamed of in his wildest dreams.

Before him, laid the true secret of Makatao.

8. Mutiny at Sea

“Crazy!” cried Bob. “Just crazy!”

The warm wind was blowing in his face at 60 kilometres an hour. At least, that was what the speedometer on the motorboat showed.

Bob stood at the wheel and looked around. Jupiter looked like an Italian playboy with his dark hair and sunglasses. But this was less due to the First Investigator’s appearance than to the boat itself. It wasn’t just any motorboat. It was the motorboat—an incredible sled from Japan that supposedly could do 120 kilometres an hour.

Jupiter and Bob couldn’t believe their eyes when they saw the modern motorboat lying between half a dozen dilapidated dugout canoes in the harbour of the neighbouring village. It turned out that it was owned by a rich Japanese businessman who spent his vacation here once a year. The rest of the time, he had it managed by the local boat rental company and rented it to tourists. But nobody had wanted it yet, the man complained, because the rental fee was much too high.

But Bob and Jupiter had money. The amount they found in Rachel Hadden’s envelope was considerable. In fact, it was crazy. They had never had so much money at their disposal in their lives. It could have been a great vacation. Unfortunately they were not here for pleasure. They were on a rescue mission where speed was of the essence. So without batting an eyelid, Jupiter held a bundle of banknotes under the manager’s nose and rented the boat for two days. At the sight of the money, the manager did not even bother to ask where they were going.

“Be careful, there’s a buoy ahead!” Jupiter cautioned.

“I can see it!” Bob turned the wheel around. The boat lay dangerously to the side, splashed the water and circled the buoy.

The sea around Pohnpei was full of islets, rocks sticking out of the water and dangerous shoals marked by bright red buoys. It was like a slalom race where Bob had to watch out for obstacles, but the frenzy of speed swept away any sense of fear.

A shallow canoe came into view, no more than a hollowed-out tree trunk in which ten locals were sitting, pushing their oars powerfully into

the waves with clockwork precision, thus setting a remarkable pace. But the motorboat was faster. As Bob overtook them, he heard the strange, rhythmic singing with which the rowers kept their movements to the beat and kept themselves amused.

“Kaselehlia!” cried Bob exuberantly and chased past the canoe. “Man, that’s awesome!”

Jupiter kept looking at the map and the compass, the only two accessories they had to find Makatao. He would have loved to let himself be carried away by Bob’s enthusiasm, but then they would have been lost in the maze of small islands within minutes.

“See that flat rock over there?” Jupe pointed out.

“Uh... Are we going left or right?”

“Right. You have to go past it on the right,” Jupiter directed. “If there’s an island behind it, we’re on the right track.”

And fifteen minutes later, they had finally passed the labyrinth of islands, rocks and buoys. Bob turned around. Pohnpei was behind them. A green paradise, on the highest mountains of which the rain-heavy clouds stuck. But above them shone a blue sky. Bob pulled his sunglasses down from his forehead and looked ahead to the endless ocean.

“Course northeast. More than 160 kilometres ahead and Makatao should be coming into sight. Now, let me take the wheel.” Jupiter lunged forward and pushed Bob aside.

“Hey! I’m the captain!” Bob shouted.

“No way, now I want my fun!” Jupe quipped. “Here, you can keep looking at the map.”

“Mutiny!” cried Bob. “Mutiny on the... What’s this boat called?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mutiny at sea!” Bob cried.

“Beware that the mutineer does not throw you overboard!” Jupe snapped. “All right, let’s pick up the pace. Your sneakiness makes me sick.”

Jupiter pushed the acceleration lever forward slightly. The 60 km/h became 70, then 80. The bow rose alarmingly far out of the water.

“Wow! But that can’t be all, right?” He sped up even more. Bob stumbled and fell into one of the bolted chairs on deck, while Jupiter clawed at the wheel, half mad with fear and euphoria.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Hey, Jupe!” Bob shouted, laughing at the roar of the engine. “You have to be cool, that’s the most important thing in such a speedboat race! So no screaming, okay?” The boat shot over a wave crest like over a ramp and flew a bit through the air.

“*Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!*” When Jupiter turned around, his hair flew in his face, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t have to see anything.

In front of him was the open Pacific Ocean. Nothing and nobody would get in their way. They could just keep speeding across the water.

“We have reached our cruising speed of 110 km/h! You can now release your seat belts and relax for the rest of the trip! ...

Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Pete was staring at a door. But it wasn’t a stone slab decorated with ancient symbols. Not a wickerwork of wood or vines. It was a white steel door. No rust, and not a slightest scratch.

Mr Schwartz was the first to find his voice: “What... what is this? Did you build this, Professor?”

“No, Mr Schwartz. It was already here,” the professor said. “And we were as stunned as you were. A modern steel door is not exactly what you’d expect in a Micronesian tomb. It was locked. It took us a whole day to pick the intricate lock. Then we realized that this door was just the beginning.”

Professor Phoenix stepped up and pushed the handle down. The door swung open. Behind it was darkness. “Come!”

Pete had expected another tunnel, but it was only a short passageway. And suddenly his feet no longer touched a stone floor but a metal grating. He could see almost nothing ahead because Phoenix had pointed his flashlight at the floor. But he was apparently standing on some sort of platform surrounded by a steel railing. And judging by the reverberation of their footsteps and whispering voices, it went even further behind this railing—much further. He could literally feel the size of the chamber.

A light flickered on. Phoenix held a match to a torch that was fixed to the wall. Seconds later, a bright flame flared up. A murmur went through the small crowd.

It was really a platform. And it was about four metres above the ground. A free-floating steel staircase led down into a huge chamber. It was perhaps twenty to thirty metres long. It was hard to estimate in the dim light, but it was almost square and a good six metres high. The walls

looked the same as in the rest of the tomb. But there the similarities ended. Everywhere in the underground chamber were white tables with computers!

What? Computers? And monitors, keyboards and printers.

Fluorescent lamps hung from the high ceiling, but they remained dark. The chairs were neatly placed against the desks. It didn't look like anyone had been working here lately. But Pete wouldn't have been surprised if an old man in a white coat, with big round eyes and wild silver hair had turned up right away and mumbled something about a flux capacitor. He would have fitted perfectly into this picture.

"What the hell is this?" cried Dr Svenson.

Pete knew what it was. He had seen it in countless movies. This was not Indiana Jones... This was James Bond—a command centre... or a laboratory. Something here was being examined, monitored or tested—something top secret. People worked here all day long, brooding over confusing computer data, giving or carrying out orders and maintaining absolute silence... or rather—this is where they had worked. Because quite obviously, this place had been abandoned.

"What is this?" Svenson repeated.

"We don't know exactly," Phoenix said. "All we know is that this whatever-it-is was built by us. By the Americans. At least there are only American computers everywhere. And on a desk at the far end of the command centre is a small American flag."

The CIA! Pete almost said his thoughts out loud, but he bit his lips at the last moment. So that was the reason why the CIA was tailing Jelena and Worthington. They had got too close to a secret that had something to do with the government. This had to be what it was all about!

"What else did you find out?" Olin asked excitedly.

"Not much. All papers and records, if any, are gone," Phoenix said. "There's not a single personal item, nothing to indicate who once worked here... or on what. There are two doors. One can't be opened. The other leads to some basic quarters. But even there, we found no clues. Although there are beds in the quarters, we preferred to sleep upstairs. Because whoever's been here might come back. We wanted to be able to leave as quickly as possible in case of emergency. The only thing certain is that all this is three or four years old at most."

"How do you know that?" Juan asked

"The computer models are relatively new," Phoenix replied.

For a moment, everyone was talking wildly. Pete's thoughts also ran wild. Who had built this place? And when? And why? And why was this facility abandoned? What had happened here?

"Can we take a look at all this?" Juan asked.

"Go ahead! But don't stumble over the cables," the professor cautioned. "Unfortunately, this torch is the only source of light we have."

Mr Schwartz was the first one down the narrow stairs. Juan and Pete followed, then came the rest. It was an eerie feeling, roaming around the command centre.

This underground chamber was undoubtedly hundreds of years old and part of a sacred tomb of a forgotten people. But all the computer tables formed such an extreme contrast that Pete constantly had the feeling of wandering through two completely different worlds at the same time. All over the floor were cables in which Pete got tangled up more than once. He stroked across a white tabletop. He blew some dust off a monitor. They were all real.

"Scary, huh?" Al showed up next to him.

"You can say that again."

"Come with me, I'll show you something!" Al took him by the arm to the back of the chamber where the light was almost absent.

There was a heavy door embedded in the solid rock face. But it was completely different from the entrance to this facility at the top of the stairs. This door looked more like it came directly from the Starship Enterprise. On the right was a small keypad built into the wall, where one could probably enter the access code. But not a single light was flashing. Everything here was dead.

"I wonder what's behind it." Pete nodded thoughtlessly and strolled on. This place was completely swept clean—like an apartment waiting for its new tenants. Whoever had been here, they hadn't been in much of a hurry to leave this place.

After a few minutes, they met in the middle of the command centre and Professor Phoenix addressed them again. "I know this is all a bit too much at once. Nevertheless, let me try to explain our plan to you, because we should get to work as soon as possible. I do not want to stay on this island any longer than necessary. First we need electricity. You brought a powerful generator, I assume?"

Mr Schwartz nodded. Ah, Pete thought. So it had been components of a generator they had dragged up here, among other things.

“Good. Once we get power, we hope to get the lights and computers back on. The locked entrance is an electronically-secured armoured door that cannot be opened manually.”

Electronically-secured armoured door! Pete really was in a James Bond movie!

“But with computers and some skill, we should be able to access the systems and open the door,” Phoenix continued. “The further course of action depends on what is behind it. We have to improvise. But Mr Hadden did not choose all of you at random. Each of you has a role in this mission. And you’ve probably just realized why you, of all the Sphinx members, were chosen for this expedition.”

Mr Schwartz nodded. “I organized the whole generator set and I’m probably the only one who can install it.”

“I am a computer expert,” Olin continued. “In fact, it was a mystery to me until just now why Hadden needed me for a mission to a Micronesian island that hadn’t seen a human soul for hundreds of years. But I’m beginning to understand...”

“Excuse me,” said Maria Svenson, raising her hand and stepping into the middle of the group. “I hate to slow you all down in your euphoria, but I think there’s one crucial point I haven’t realized yet. We all have a task, fair enough. We are probably the perfect team for this mission, maybe. But what I still don’t get is why are we here? What’s this facility? And above all, what does Hadden expect us to do?” She looked around provocatively.

Pete could feel the heat on him. It was intolerably hot. He wanted to get out of here—right away.

Professor Phoenix gave a creepy smile. “When we discovered this facility, I immediately contacted Mr Hadden on radio. I told him that it was unlikely we would find any Micronesian art treasures here because someone had been here before us. But we have found something else... This!” Phoenix pointed at the computers. “I told him everything we knew at that time. He wanted to rethink the situation. We stayed on the *Montana* to wait for his answer.

“A few days later, Hadden radioed in and announced that he would send a second ship with experts and the necessary equipment as soon as possible.”

“Experts!” Juan said scornfully. “Typical Hadden.”

The professor laughed. It echoed eerily in the expanse of the chamber. “I admit I was surprised to learn today that you all have not the slightest

idea why you are here. Nevertheless, your presence here is no coincidence. I suspect, for security reasons, Mr Hadden has told only one of you the real reason for your journey. One of you knows exactly what we're supposed to be doing here, what Hadden wants from us, and when this mission is to complete."

Slowly, very slowly all heads turned in Pete's direction. Everyone looked at him. Pete's legs became soft. The blood rushed from his head to his feet. He became dizzy. Everything around him suddenly seemed to go in slow motion.

Professor Phoenix smiled. Albert fixed his eyes on him with excitement. Anne seemed afraid of what he would say. Schwartz looked as if he was waiting for an order from him. Juan scowled at him. Olin gave the impression that he was following the evening news with interest.

And on Dr Svenson's face was a sneering smile. "All right, Skinner. I'd say your big moment has come."

9. The Silver Spider

“There!” cried Bob. “There it is! Makatao!”

Jupiter threw a glance at the map and nodded. “This must be it. I had calculated that we wouldn’t reach the island for half an hour, but I must have been wrong... Or the speedometer is wrong.”

“Wow! Do you think we were faster than 110 km/h?” Bob slowed down. “How are we gonna do this? If we race towards the island now, we’ll be spotted immediately.”

Jupiter nodded. “We should wait until sunset. It’s another hour or so. Then we can only hope that no one will hear or see us.”

He looked over to the island. Suddenly he startled. “Hey, Bob! What’s that?”

“What?”

“That second island right there!” Jupiter brought out the binoculars and scanned the horizon. “There’s no doubt there’s another island right next to Makatao.”

Bob shook his head. “No. At least not if the map is right. Let me see it.” He ripped the map from the First Investigator’s hand. “I told you so. Makatao lies lonely and deserted in the ocean. There is no other island next to it.”

“But I can see it right in front of us.”

“Are you saying the map is wrong?”

Jupiter shook his head thoughtfully. “No. I’m afraid we are wrong.”

“What?”

“Yes. We are early. And there’s this second island. We must have been a little off our course the whole way here. It shouldn’t be a problem going by the compass, but on such a long route, it’s pretty easy to go off course. Stop the engine!”

Bob slowed down and finally stopped the motorboat completely. They drifted along quietly. For the first time in a long while, all they heard was the wind and the waves clapping against the hull. There was an eerie silence.

Jupiter shook his head, sighing. “You can’t tell anyone about this.”

“About what?”

“That we got lost in the Pacific Ocean.”

Pete wanted to just run away... or to scream out loud. The smartest thing, of course, would have been to finally, finally, finally tell the truth... that he wasn't Skinner Norris... that it had all been a terrible mix-up from day one... that he had no idea what this was all about.

Skinny! That son of a bitch had been lying to them the whole time. He always knew what was going on at Makatao. And they all fell for it, in the end even Pete himself, although he hadn't trusted Skinny from the beginning. But if he wanted to take revenge on Skinny, he had to get out of here alive somehow. He had to flee the island. In order to do that, he had to... he had to buy time.

He looked at the expectant faces. Then he shouted happily and cheerfully: “Let's get to work! There's no time to lose!” He hoped nobody noticed the slightly hysterical squeak in his voice.

“Wait a minute!” cried Maria Svenson furiously. “You still won't tell us why we're here?”

“I think you know that, Dr Svenson,” Pete said confidently. “Mr Hadden wanted ancient Micronesian art. Then he found out that there was something much more valuable hidden here. And that is exactly what he wants now. We are here to retrieve it for him.”

“And where would that be?” Schwartz asked.

“Behind the locked door.”

Juan stepped up and sparkled at Pete angrily. “And what is behind that locked door?”

Pete was silent. Inside he was trembling with fear. No matter what he said now, everyone would know immediately that he was lying. So he said nothing.

The air crackled. For a very long moment, Pete was sure Juan was about to pounce on him. But then Professor Phoenix came to his aid. “I think each of us has a job to do. And if Skinner's job is to keep a secret for security reasons, then we should accept that.”

“Hadden is fooling with us,” Juan exploded. “He sent this kid to fool us all!”

“Stop it, Juan!” Schwartz snapped. “Are you trying to tell me that you haven't received an advance from Mr Hadden?”

Juan was silent.

“It was a very respectable advance,” Schwartz said. “Mr Hadden has no reason to double-cross us. He pays us to do our jobs. And how he wants to do it is entirely up to him. We have a job to do. So we better get to work like Skinner said.”

Juan was on the verge of a second explosion, but Professor Phoenix interrupted him in time. “All right, Schwartz, get a team together to help you set up the generator. Everyone else, take the rest of the equipment down here. We’re gonna need almost everything here. Let’s go!”

It actually worked. Everyone followed Professor Phoenix’s instructions, without going into the subject again. Pete couldn’t believe it. He’d bluffed his way through. But at the same time he was well aware that he had only delayed and ultimately aggravated the inevitable. Should the truth come to light now, it would be at his neck. Before it came to that, he had to get out of here. Tonight, he would hijack the *Explorer* and sail away.

In the last few days, he had been on the bridge often enough to at least know how to steer the ship. That had to be enough. He would steer to the next island, go ashore and somehow manage to get by. The others still had the *Montana*, to get away from Makatao. But by the time they realized he was missing, Pete would be long gone, he hoped. But very soon, he had to play the game. It wasn’t hard.

Suddenly everyone gave him the cold shoulder. He had gone from being a simple cabin boy to a carrier of secrets, the central figure of the whole expedition. But this meant that most of them were no longer friendly. Anne seemed to be permanently afraid of him. Dr Svenson avoided him. And Pete was very careful never to be alone with Juan. Olin once gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder and told him not to worry.

Only Al was not impressed by the changed in atmosphere at all. As they were hauling a wooden crate into the command centre, he said: “So what’s the secret, Skinner?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know. Your secret. You can tell me, right?”

“Uh... no.”

“I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

Pete’s secret was that he didn’t know the secret, so he said: “You’ll find out soon.” That wasn’t even a lie. For the rest of the day, Pete avoided talking to Al.

In fact, he avoided speaking at all. He pretended to be awfully busy. But the more eager he was to help with the work, the faster the bomb ticked, and the faster they would finish.

They worked themselves to exhaustion. Unpacking the crates and boxes and carrying the contents down the narrow stairs proved to be an extremely difficult task.

In the command centre, Mr Schwartz was busy setting up the generator in the dim light of torches and digging through the tangled cables to find the right connections. There were many failures, and in between, it looked like the unit would never be able to provide the power needed for all the equipment. No one knew how many—and which—devices in this facility and behind the locked doors needed power.

But finally, many hours after sunset, the time had come. They gathered in the command centre to be present at the decisive moment.

“We did it,” Professor Phoenix said over the monotonous hum of the generator. “Mr Schwartz, this is your moment of truth.” The man with the scar smiled encouragingly at him. “Let’s do it!”

Mr Schwartz pulled a big lever. There was an electrical hiss. Something hummed. That was all it was. Pete took a deep, inner breath. He didn’t know what had gone wrong, but it didn’t matter. His reprieve had been extended, that was all that mattered.

The lights, unused for years, began to flicker until they finally flared up one after the other and bathed the underground chamber in bright, cold light. From one second to the next, the eerie atmosphere was chased away by the cool aura of a high-tech laboratory. Now all that was missing were the scientists in the white coats.

Everyone applauded enthusiastically. For better or worse, Pete remembered the clapping, although he was more in the mood to run away as fast as possible.

Mr Olin walked up to one of the computers and turned it on. It beeped, then the computer hummed softly. “It works!” he shouted enthusiastically. “The whole system seems to be still intact!”

“Bravo!” praised the professor. “That was great work we did today!”

“And not the last,” Olin announced and turned on the monitor. “We may find out more in a moment... or even open the door.”

They all came curiously closer. For a few seconds, a series of letters and numbers rushed across the black screen. Then the startup screen appeared—the American flag. But that wasn’t all. Above the white stars

on a blue background and the red and white stripes was the stylized image of an eerie silver spider that shot down at an angle on its web, baring its fangs, as if it was chasing its prey. Below it was written in sober letters: 'Project Spider'.

"Imaginative name," said Dr Svenson sarcastically. "The question is—what does it mean? Can you get into the program, Olin?"

The computer expert pressed a button and a new screen appeared. The program required a user name and password. Olin sighed heavily. "It will take me some time to crack this."

"What about the door?"

Al ran over to the keypad. "There's power to this," he shouted, typing in a bunch of numbers at random. An angry buzzing sound and the flash of a red light was the answer.

"I suppose I can open the door from the computer as well," Olin said. "But first I have to break the code."

"But no more today," Phoenix decided. "I think we all deserve some sleep."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to try for a while to outsmart the computer," Olin said. He smiled. "I may be dog-tired, but at the same time I'm psyched enough to hack around on the keyboard a bit. Do you remember? That's why I'm here, after all."

Phoenix nodded. "All right. Need any help?"

"I think I can handle this by myself."

"Whatever you say."

"We've caused so much chaos down here by now, we might as well move into the staff quarters, don't you think?" Al asked.

Phoenix paused to think for a moment. "You are right. If you want to sleep in a bed for a change, you're welcome to go there."

Little by little, all of them dug out their sleeping bags from the scattered equipment and found a place to spend the night. Anne, Juan and Dr Svenson preferred to sleep in the prayer chamber. Pete would have preferred to join them. From there, escape was much easier. But he was afraid that Juan would not sleep a wink to watch him with suspicious eyes. So he decided to move into one of the quarters.

Fortunately, there were enough rooms, so he had one to himself. As he closed the door behind him, he breathed a sigh of relief and threw himself onto one of the narrow beds.

What a day! First the encounter with AI, which made his heart skip a beat, then the tomb and finally the discovery of the command centre and the mysterious Project Spider. Not to mention the fact that his cover was almost blown by a hair's breadth, and he had been in mortal fear practically all day. He was finished! But the last thing that could happen to him now was to fall asleep.

Two minutes later, he was already dreaming of white palm beaches... back in California!

Pete jumped up. Makatao! He was on Makatao! And he had to get out of here! How long had he been asleep? He pressed the light of his watch—one o'clock in the morning. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was not too late. In fact, it was the best time for an escape. By now, Olin must have gone to sleep.

Pete got up, took a few deep breaths and jumped on the spot to get really awake. Then he opened the door. The soft squeaking of the hinges echoed from the rock walls.

The corridor of the staff quarters was quiet. The doors to the other rooms were closed, the one to the command centre was open. From there, a faint glimmer of light reached him. The generator hummed. Pete imagined that it was louder than a few hours ago, but probably he was just too tense.

On tiptoe, Pete crept down the corridor and took a look into the command centre. The main lights were switched off. The only lights came from the computer screen that was turned on. Olin was sitting in front of it.

Bummer! Pete would never be able to sneak past Olin unnoticed. He thought feverishly. It was the only way out of the place, and the only time. Tomorrow was probably too late to escape. Should he wait until Olin went to sleep? And what would he do if Olin worked through the night?

A small noise tore him from his thoughts. What was that? Some kind of growl. There it was—one more time! No, it wasn't a growl, it was... snoring!

Olin was asleep! He had dozed off in front of the computer!

Pete had to take the chance. He scurried as quickly and as quietly as possible through the command centre to the metal stairs and looked around.

Olin had not moved, he was still sitting slumped in front of the computer. "Let's get out of here!" Pete thought to himself.

The stairs squeaked and rattled with every single step. Probably it wasn't even very loud, but it seemed to Pete like a deafening noise that could wake up all of Micronesia. But Olin continued to sleep.

When the Second Investigator finally arrived at the top, he was drenched in sweat. He got through the white steel door silently and proceeded into the tunnel. Pete had a flashlight with him, but he did not dare to turn it on. From the prayer chamber, steady breathing sounds could be heard. This was one last hurdle to overcome, then he would be free! But it was pitch dark. He groped his way along the round wall in the hope of not stumbling over anyone.

Suddenly there was a rustle—right in front of him! Pete froze. Someone had turned around in his or her sleeping bag. Pete had to get past him or her somehow!

Hesitantly he left his secure hold on the wall, took two steps away from the wall and continued his way in complete darkness. Then he returned to the wall and groped his way to the exit. Finally, he reached the stairs.

He felt around on the wall until he found the magic circle. Pete pressed his hand on it and with a rumbling and scratching noise. Now at the latest, everyone should be awake! Nevertheless, the altar door opened. With the little light that came in from outside, he quickly did the weight transfer procedure.

He ran up the stairs into the open. Air! Open sky! The moon cast an unholy shadow over the place of worship. It wasn't very bright, but it was enough to find its way.

But then a thought occurred to Pete. If someone had woken up from the sound of the altar door, then it might have been wiser for him to wait a moment longer. If someone followed him, he could still claim that he just wanted to get some fresh air. This was always better than being seen as secretly sneaking away.

The Second Investigator waited until the altar door closed as if by magic. Then he slowly counted to fifty. The door remained closed. Apparently, he hadn't woken anyone.

"All right, Pete," he murmured. "Time to leave for good."

Suddenly, he heard someone say: "But why? We just got here."

10. The Laughing Shadow

Pete winced. He had been discovered! Behind a weathered wall, a figure stepped forward. Then a second one. They stopped in the shadows.

Should he run off? Perhaps he could still make it to the *Explorer*. But he never would have a chance to get the ship going before his pursuers caught up with him. The game was over.

The first shadow laughed. "Don't panic, Pete." Then he stepped into the moonlight and Pete's heart leapt.

"Jupe!"

"Good to see you again, Pete," the second shadow said.

"Bob! What are you...? What... what..."

"Spit it out, buddy," Jupe said.

"What are you doing here?" Pete was stunned.

"To save you," Bob said.

Pete ran to his friends and fell into their arms.

"How did you get here?" Suddenly he had to laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"To save you," Bob repeated. "That is, if you need saving. Boy, am I glad to see you safe and sound. We had no idea. Are you all right, Pete?"

"Yes... That means no. I'm not... oh, my goodness! I have so much to tell you! But not here. We have to leave."

"What is this hole you just crawled out of?"

"Is that the burial ground?"

"Are there other people down there?"

"Did they find anything?"

"Did they actually discover you aboard the *Explorer*?"

Pete raised his hands defensively. "People, please! Believe me, we should get out of here! How did you come here?"

"By motorboat," Bob replied. "We would've been here sooner, but we got lost and took a while to find our bearings."

"The timing was perfect," assured Pete.

"You know, the ancient Micronesian people sailed the Pacific Ocean thousands of years ago. I read some of it before the journey and

remembered how they used the position of the moon and the stars to—”

“I’m sure this is all very exciting, Jupe, but could you not tell me about it until we have left the island? Please!” Pete turned to leave.

Which way was the path to the beach again? Over there. He went off, stepped around a rock—and stopped right on his track startled!

There was someone standing there—a man with a cold smile and a gun in his hand.

Juan!

“Not so fast, my young friend, Skinner... or what did your friends call you? Pete?”

In a flash, Pete played through all the possibilities. There were none.

“Don’t even think about running away. And your friends better not, either. I guarantee I’m a good shot, even in the dark.”

“Juan, I... I beg you, I can explain!” Pete stammered.

“You don’t have to explain anything, laddie! I knew there was something wrong with you from the beginning. After tonight, even more so. That’s why I’ve been lying in wait out here. And I was right! By the way, I think I recognize your two friends now, especially the fat one. Now get going! I’m curious to hear what Professor Phoenix has to say about my discovery... Pete.”

He waved his gun unmistakably. Pete had no choice, but lead them towards the altar.

“This could have been quite a rescue,” growled Pete. “Thanks anyway.”

“Open up!” Juan instructed when Pete reached the altar.

Pete pushed the magic circle and the altar door swung aside.

“Could someone explain to me what this is?” Bob asked. “And what is this all about?”

“Shut up!” Juan snapped.

“Wow!” said the First Investigator as he went down the stairs. Once all of them were in, Pete did the weight transfer procedure.

“Fascinating!” Jupiter remarked. “You’ve gotta tell me what this is, Pete.”

“Shut up!” Juan snapped again. “And go ahead.”

Juan had a flashlight and shone the way for Pete, who was leading the way. He would have liked to explain to his friends what he saw here, but he better kept his mouth shut.

When they entered the prayer chamber, Maria Svenson buzzed reluctantly and opened her eyes. She blinked into the flashlight and mumbled: "What's going on here?"

"Wake up!" Juan said. "We have visitors."

"Huh?" From the limited light source, Dr Svenson took a closer look at them. Suddenly she sat up. "Hey, I know the two of them! I've seen them before!"

"Come on, you three, to the command centre!" Juan instructed and shone his flashlight at the tunnel.

"Command centre?" echo Bob. "Where are we, anyway?"

"Shut up!" Juan snapped again.

Pete led them through the tunnel to the steel door and opened it. The command centre was still illuminated by the faint flickering of the monitor. But this was enough to make Bob and Jupiter gasp with amazement.

"Wow!" repeated Jupiter. "What is this?"

"As if you didn't know, Fatso!" growled Juan. "Go on, down the stairs! Let's wake up Professor Phoenix. He'll know what to do with you."

"What's going on here? Who is this?" Olin woke up from his slumber.

"Olin, we've got visitors," Juan said. "Get the professor."

When all of them reached the bottom, Juan hit the light switch. There was a flash of lightning, the generator emitted blue sparks, then it was dark.

"Olin! What happened? Olin!" Juan shouted. "Damn it! Don't you three try to escape!"

The flashlight's beam of light rushed frantically through the darkness. The Three Investigators still stood motionless.

And now Al came storming out of the quarters. He was carrying a gun. "What's going on? Who is that? Turn on the lights!"

"Sit on the floor!" Juan instructed.

"Excuse me?" Al asked.

"Not you, Al. You go wake Schwartz and the professor! Quick! And you three, sit on the floor!"

"Somebody turn on the lights!" Olin shouted.

"The generator blew up!" Juan snapped.

"What?" cried Dr Svenson, who had just appeared at the top of the stairs.

For two minutes, there was total chaos. Although The Three Investigators sat obediently on the floor, Juan waved his gun and flashlight around endlessly, everyone ran wildly and shouted something.

It only ended when Mr Schwartz and Professor Phoenix entered the command centre. The man with the scar watched the confusion for a few moments, then yelled: "Quiet!" Everyone fell silent.

"Turn on the lights!" Phoenix shouted.

"The generator's not working," Juan said.

Schwartz approached the machine. "Somebody tampered with it! Sabotage!"

"All right. What's going on?" Phoenix said. "Who is that? And I would be very grateful if only one of you would answer me! Juan!"

The Spaniard proudly reported his catch. "His real name isn't Skinner. It's Pete. And I'm sure he sabotaged the generator. He was about to take off. Along with his cronies."

Phoenix nodded. "Fine. Does anyone else know anything about these guys?"

"I know those two," said Dr Svenson. "A week before we left, they came to my house and asked me about Sphinx. And at our meeting at EthnoArt's office, they overheard us. Anyway, I assume it was them."

"It was us," Jupiter explained confidently. Up to now he had kept silent. But now the moment of truth had obviously come.

Professor Phoenix bent down to look closer at the First Investigator.

Jupiter recoiled. From the beam of the flashlights, he saw the professor's disfigured face up close—more so, in the rush, he had not put on his eye patch. Jupiter also thought that he looked like a scar-faced beggar with a scowl of a tiger.

"Who are you?" He asked the question calmly, but the threatening undertone could not be ignored.

But Jupiter did not even think of being intimidated. "May we please stand up? Then I will tell you."

Phoenix nodded slightly and Jupiter rose. Then he reached into this pocket and pull out their business card and gave it to the professor. It said:



“Investigators?” the professor remarked. “You guys are investigators? Who are you working for?”

Then Jupe explained what had happened from the beginning. He began with how they got on the trail of Sphinx and Mr Hadden, of Skinny Norris and the fatal mix-up on the *Explorer*. Then Pete took over. He couldn’t look into either of Phoenix’s eyes when he told how he had woken up on board of the ship a week ago and had taken over the role of Skinny Norris without wanting it at first. And how he had made his escape plan today and wanted to disappear when his friends showed up to save him.

Everybody got up close so as not to miss a word. Now and then, a murmur went through the small group.

Maria Svenson once or twice let out a short laugh. “This story is absurd,” she finally said. “So you’re telling me that if I hadn’t called you ‘Skinner’ that first morning, you would have made yourself known right away?” Pete nodded.

“What you’re saying sounds like a crazy fairy tale,” Phoenix admitted, “but I see no reason why I shouldn’t believe you.”

“They’re lying!” Juan intervened.

“Do you have proof of this?” Phoenix asked.

“Yes. Skinner or Pete or whatever his real name is, sabotaged the generator to prevent our mission from succeeding. That’s the real reason he came aboard. The three of them got rid of the real Skinner, and Pete took his part, because that’s what he was supposed to do—sabotage!”

Juan stepped forward angrily and grabbed Pete by the collar. “Who are you actually working for?”

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Pete stammered.

“Who’s really behind this, I want to know!” Juan asked aggressively.

“Let the boy go, Juan!” cried the professor.

Juan didn't move.

Quick as lightning, Phoenix jumped forward, grabbed Juan and threw him aside. "When I tell you to let him go, you let him go, got it?"

For a dangerous moment, it looked as if the two were going to go at each other. Then Juan turned away. Phoenix relaxed.

"I told the truth. I did not sabotage the generator," Pete said. "I never even touched it."

"Skinner... I mean Pete is right," Al said. "He didn't do it."

All turned their heads in astonishment.

"What are you saying?" asked Dr Svenson.

"It wasn't him. I woke up tonight by a noise. Someone was creeping across the command centre. I got up to look. I discovered Mr Schwartz tampering with the generator."

"What!" Schwartz shouted. "That is a lie."

Phoenix stopped Schwartz and asked Al to continue.

"He didn't see me," Al proceeded unperturbed. "I watched him for a while but could not see exactly what he was doing. Finally, he returned to his quarters. I thought I'd keep this between us for now. I didn't know what he was really doing there. But I guess that's clear now."

Then Phoenix turned to Schwartz and asked: "What do you have to say to that, Schwartz?"

"That is a lie!" cried Mr Schwartz. "The boy is lying! I mean... he ain't lying. I really went to the command centre to see if Mr Olin had progressed. But he wasn't there."

"I must have been up there for a moment... well, you know." Olin explained.

"The generator was making strange noises, so I took a closer look," Schwartz continued. "But I didn't sabotage it!"

"It looked like it," Al objected.

"You cheeky rascal! Suspecting me of having something to do with this!" Schwartz hit back. "Surely it is obvious who is the saboteur here. He looked over at The Three Investigators. Skinner has been lying to us the whole time."

"My name is Pete."

"That does not mean that he destroyed the generator," Al said.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "I've only been here a few minutes, but I think you'd do well to mistrust your team instead of us, Mr Phoenix."

"Shut up, fat boy!" Juan said to him.

“That’s the limit,” cried Dr Svenson.

“We should lock up these three,” demanded Schwartz.

“Quiet!” Professor Phoenix looked around furiously. “We’ll find out who sabotaged what. And whether the story of the three boys is really true. And whether Pete knows the secret of the island or not, we’ll solve it regardless. One by one! First, we need electricity again!”

“Wait a minute!” cried Dr Svenson. “By the way, where’s Anne?”

Everyone turned. There was silence.

“Where is Anne?” Dr Svenson repeated. “Hasn’t anyone seen her? Hasn’t she been here the whole time?”

Al shook his head slowly. “No, I don’t think so. That’s the trouble with Anne. She’s so easy to miss.”

Then Pete remembered something. “She was already out of the prayer chamber when Juan led us down here. “I certainly didn’t see her.”

Unrest broke out again.

“Has something happened to her?”

“Did she sabotage the generator?”

“Did she discover anything?”

“Has she escaped?”

“The three boys kidnapped her!”

“Nonsense. Juan would have seen them outside.”

“Silence!” cried Professor Phoenix. “As I said, one thing at a time! We need electricity and we must find Miss Fox.”

He turned to Mr Schwartz, hesitated, then turned to Olin. “Do you think you can fix the generator?”

Olin nodded. “I can try.”

“All right. You three boys will stay here,” Phoenix instructed. “Juan, tie them up! Better safe than sorry!”

“With pleasure!” Juan said.

“Olin, you keep an eye on those three while we go look for Miss Fox,” Phoenix continued.

“All right,” Olin replied.

“All others come with me! Miss Fox can only be out there somewhere,” Phoenix said. “And you, Mr Schwartz, stay close to me!”

11. The Missing Sailor

“I don’t believe all this,” Pete said again and again. “I don’t believe it!”

They were tied to chairs so far apart that it was impossible to think of releasing each other. The command centre was bathed in the gloomy glow of the wall torch. Apart from Mr Olin, who tinkered with the generator with the help of a flashlight, they were alone. The others searched the island for Anne. They had been gone for an hour or so.

During this time, The Three Investigators had told each other in detail what they had experienced.

“Actually, everything would have been perfect,” Pete said. “You arrive just as I’m about to leave... and then that stupid Juan comes between us.”

“But there’s good in it,” said Jupiter.

“Jupiter Jones, please explain to me what is good about the fact that we are now tied up in an underground tomb with an evil curse on it, waiting to be lynched!”

“If we had run away, we wouldn’t have had a chance to solve the mystery of Makatao.”

“Well, I can do without that now, thank you very much,” Pete quipped.

“But not me. This case is getting more and more mysterious and I’ll go insane if I don’t find out what’s behind it. What does Hadden want? Why did his sister send us here? What did Skinny know about all this? What is this place? Is Schwartz really a saboteur? Where is Anne? And what is hiding behind that door?” Jupiter fixed his eyes on the electronically-secured armoured door as if he wanted to open it by himself using his thoughts.

“The only way we’re gonna get all this out is right here on this island,” Jupe said. “At the latest, when the generator is working again and the door can be opened with the help of the computer. Right, Mr Olin?”

Olin looked up in surprise from his work. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Or are you saying you didn’t listen to us all the time?”

Olin smiled. "You are a clever boy, Jupiter. I am not at all clear what role you play in this confusion, but you must be watched out for." He winked at him and then continued to twist cables and oil machine parts.

"Do you think you can get this thing to work again?" Jupiter asked.

"I think so. It's not as badly damaged as I thought."

"Did anybody really fiddle with it?" Bob asked.

"Can't say for sure. It could be."

"Do you think it was Mr Schwartz?" Jupiter asked.

Olin put the screwdriver aside and looked at Jupiter seriously. "I don't mean anything. I'm just doing my job here. If you want to know if someone has tampered with the generator and if so, who it was, if you want to know where Anne is or what is behind that door—I have no idea. And I will not presume to make unfounded statements, as certain other people in this group do. I just wanna fix this thing."

Jupiter nodded, but did not let the man out of his sight.

"How are we ever gonna get out of all this?" Bob asked gloomily.

"Nobody believes us. Whether it was Mr Schwartz or Anne who sabotaged the generator, or whether it went off by itself, we're the fools in the end."

"Wait and see," said Jupiter. "Just wait and see."

"Where do you get your confidence?" Pete asked.

Jupiter did not answer, but threw a very telling glance at his friends as if he already had a plan... or as if he knew something the others didn't. But before Bob or Pete could follow up, the door at the top of the stairs flew open and Professor Phoenix and Juan rushed in.

"Is she here?" Phoenix asked.

"No," Olin replied.

"Damn!" moaned the professor, exhausted. "We searched the whole crater for her and walked down to the beach and into the hidden bay. The two ships are still there, the motorboat as well. So she didn't escape. But where is she?"

"Where are the other three?" Olin asked.

"By the ships to guard them. I don't trust her, but it could be she's double-crossed us and wants to run away. I'm beginning to trust no one."

"Me neither," Juan muttered.

"We've got to find out what's going on here," cried Phoenix. "Olin, where are you at?"

"Almost done. Just a few more minutes. But that just means we'll have power. As far as the computers go..."

“Jupiter can help you with that!” cried Pete.

“No way!” Juan intervened.

“But he’s good at this!” Pete countered. “He can crack the system!”

“Wait and see,” Phoenix said sternly.

“Could you untie us anyway, please?” Jupiter asked. “I’m sure we won’t cause you any trouble. In the long run this inflexible posture is not very conducive to general well-being.”

Professor Phoenix raised one eyebrow, which gave his face a demonic expression. Then he stepped towards the three of them and loosened their shackles one by one. Juan watched reluctantly.

“Thank you very much,” Jupiter said and rubbed his wrists.

“I’m ready,” said Mr Olin. “The generator should be back working. Would you like to take over, Professor?”

Phoenix nodded slightly and stepped towards the generator. He put his hand on the switch.

“Stop!” Jupiter cried and jumped forward.

The professor stopped and turned around.

Juan’s hand twitched at the weapon on his belt. “What is it now?”

“Do not turn on the generator!” Jupe said. “It’ll blow up in your face.”

“Excuse me?” the professor asked, bewildered.

“There will be a short circuit, with some bad luck, a cable fire, which will paralyze all connected devices at once,” Jupiter exclaimed.

“What are you talking about?” Phoenix asked.

“Listen, Professor! My uncle owns a salvage yard—The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach.”

“I really don’t know what—” the professor growled.

“What I’m trying to say is I know about these machines. My uncle buys them broken, gets them fixed and sells them again. In fact, he lets me fix them. I know how a generator works. And I’ve been monitoring Mr Olin very closely for the last hour. I was under the impression that he was doing very well, until he’s got the wires spliced together so that when you turn it on, the whole thing goes boom.”

Olin laughed nervously. “This is getting weirder and weirder. Why would I do that?”

“Because you are the saboteur,” Jupiter said calmly.

“Excuse me?” Olin said, surprised.

“Professor, lock up these kids,” Juan demanded furiously.

“I will,” Professor Phoenix promised. “As soon as I’ve heard what the boy has to say.”

Jupiter stepped up to him. “You see these three wires here? Incorrectly connected.”

Phoenix bent over the switchboard and frowned. After a while he nodded. “I think the boy is right.”

Olin turned pale. “Really? May I take a look? Oh, my goodness! How could this happen! I must have been distracted by these three talking over there.”

“That means the generator really would have been destroyed for good if I turned it on?” Phoenix asked.

“I... I... I’m sorry, Professor!” Olin stammered. “It’s good that Jupiter watched me so carefully, otherwise...”

Phoenix ripped the cables out of their connection and asked Olin to plug them back together properly under the watchful eyes of all present. Then Olin turned on the generator. Buzzing, it began to work and converted the burning petrol into electrical energy. The lights flickered and flared up. Phoenix nodded blankly at the First Investigator. “Thank you, Jupiter. And now you, Mr Olin...”

“Professor, I swear to you, it was an accident! Why would I sabotage the whole mission?”

“I don’t know. But right now, my faith in everyone here is very much shaken.”

“It was you, Mr Olin,” Jupiter claimed again. “And I have evidence.”

Olin laughed insecurely. “What kind of evidence is that?”

“You weren’t here when Mr Schwartz came into the command centre looking at the generator making odd noises.”

“Right. I told you, I was upstairs to... to relieve myself.” Olin said.

“So you say you were out in the fresh air.”

Olin nodded.

The First Investigator turned to Juan. “Was that really him?”

“What?” Juan remarked, surprised.

“You were outside all the time, watching the altar, waiting for Pete. You must have seen Mr Olin if he really left the tomb.”

Juan frowned. Then his eyes darkened.

“No,” he said. “I haven’t seen him. And I was wide awake the whole time. Mr Olin never left the facility.”

Triumphantly Jupiter turned to Olin again. “Can you explain this?”

“Now... now I remember. I wasn’t outside, just upstairs in the prayer chamber. I was getting some of my things up there.”

“You weren’t in the prayer chamber,” replied Jupiter. “It’s pitch dark there. You would have to turn on the light to find anything. Then, you would have noticed that Anne is missing... and in that case, you would’ve shared what you knew with the others. You would have said something like: ‘She was here two hours ago’... or ‘She disappeared two hours ago’.”

“I... uh, it’s none of your damn business where I was a few hours ago,” Olin defended himself.

“I think so, Mr Olin,” Professor Phoenix said threateningly.

“I can guess where you were,” Jupiter continued unperturbed. “There is only one logical explanation. If you were neither outside nor in the prayer chamber, nor here, nor in the staff quarters—else you would have been seen in these places. Then only one place remains.” Jupiter pointed at the door. “The electronically-secured armoured door—the door behind which are hidden the answers to all our questions.”

“This is absurd,” Olin laughed. “The door is locked and apparently that has not changed.”

Jupiter shook his head calmly. “You are the computer expert. There was a reason you wanted to work through the night. So you could walk through that door and do whatever you wanted to do without anyone noticing. Then you sabotaged the generator to keep us out. Too bad for you that Mr Schwartz couldn’t sleep and discovered you were missing in the command centre.”

“Wow,” Pete said. “I’m glad you’re here, Jupe.”

Juan and Professor Phoenix lined up threateningly in front of Mr Olin. He involuntarily took a step back. And another. And another, until he hit a chair and stopped.

“Jupiter’s conclusions sound remarkably logical,” Phoenix said. “What do you have to say to that, Olin?”

“One thing, Professor—damn you!” Olin reached behind, grabbed the chair and hurled it at Professor Phoenix. Phoenix raised his arms, but was too slow. The backrest slammed against his head, the skin on his forehead split open. He went down moaning.

Olin reached under his shirt and pulled a gun out of nowhere. He took turns pointing it at Juan and The Three Investigators.

“You just sit tight.” He spun around and ran through the command centre towards the armoured door. No sooner had he turned his back on

them than Juan pulled out his gun and aimed at the fugitive. He made the safety catch click.

Pete grabbed the chair lying on the floor and hurled it against Juan's outstretched arm. One leg of the chair crashed against the gun and tore it from Juan's hand.

"Don't shoot!" yelled Pete "Are you stupid?"

"You little idiot!" cried Juan. "He's getting away!"

"Shut up, Juan!" It had been on Pete's tongue for a week. "He's not getting away!"

Pete sprinted after Olin. Bob and Jupiter followed him. The traitor had reached the armoured door and with flying fingers entered a code into the keypad. It beeped and the two halves of the door slid apart hissing. A second later, Olin had disappeared into the corridor behind it. The door began to close as Pete slipped through.

What happened to Bob and Jupiter? The Second Investigator turned around. "Hurry!"

Bob was already through and at the last second, Jupiter squeezed through the opening too. With a pneumatic hiss, the door closed. On the display of the keypad on this side of the door, a word flashed in red letters: 'Locked'.

12. Death Trap Mine

“Will we get out of here?” Bob asked.

“We’ll deal with that later,” cried Jupiter. “Come on, after him!”

They were in a long corridor where the lighting was bright and white. There was a door every few metres. Olin just disappeared at the end of the corridor around the corner.

The Three Investigators sprinted off. After only a few metres, Pete took the lead. He raced around the corner. Another corridor, more doors, more junctions. Pete saw cameras on the ceiling. But Olin was gone.

“Darn! Where’d he go?” He pushed the door handle down. It’s locked. The next door was also locked.

“They’re all locked up,” gasped Jupiter. “He must have turned off somewhere.”

Suddenly they heard a humming sound. It came from a corridor to the left in front of them. They ran towards it. At its end was a metal double door.

“A lift!” cried Bob in surprise. “It’s going up right now!”

“Or down,” Jupiter said and ran towards the door.

“Down,” he said, looking at the lift display. He pressed a button.

The clattering stopped. The lift had arrived at its destination. But it did not come back again.

Pete hammered angrily on the button. “Come on, you stupid thing!”

“Let’s go, Pete, it’s no use. Olin probably blocked it downstairs. We gotta find another way.”

“But there is no other way,” Bob said. “Or do you see some stairs?”

They rattled the surrounding doors. All were locked.

“I guess there’s only one thing to do,” Bob said, pointing to the lift door.”

“You... you mean you want us to climb down the shaft?” Pete asked.

“You got something better?” Bob replied.

“No.”

With their combined strength, they pushed the door open to reveal a dark lift shaft carved into the raw rock. The steel cables that transported

the cabin were still shaking slightly.

Jupiter looked down and blew a whistle.

“Pretty deep. The lift cabin is about six metres below us. There are no floors in between. The question is... how do we get down?”

“Well,” Pete said and took off his jacket and T-shirt. Then he wore back his jacket and wrapped his T-shirt tightly around one of the steel cables and held on to it. Then he jumped into the shaft without hesitation. Rapidly it went down. The T-shirt prevented the rope from cutting into Pete’s palms. But when he landed on the roof of the cabin a bit too fast, his T-shirt was ruined.

“Follow me!” he shouted up. “It’s easy!”

Both followed Pete in taking off their T-shirts and wore their jackets back. Then Bob proceeded without hesitation. Jupiter needed a moment to overcome his fear of the dark shaft. The fact that the rope had carried Bob and Pete did not mean that it would also bear his weight. Besides, he probably did not have enough strength in his hands to slow down his fall. But finally Jupiter also jumped.

The cliffs flew past him. It was very fast, too fast! He clung to his T-shirt tighter, but it didn’t help. Like a wet sack, he fell into the depths.

“Watch out!” he shouted. “Aaaaaah!”

Pete and Bob jumped to the side on the cabin roof when Jupiter came down beside them. Like a sledgehammer, his feet blew the lock on the emergency exit hatch and he fell into the lift cabin.

“Did something happen to you?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Typical Jupe,” said Pete, shaking his head. “Always the direct way.”

“Come on, let’s go!” Jupe shouted.

Bob and Pete jumped into the cabin. The door had actually been blocked from closing by an iron bar.

Here the lighting was not bright and white, but threateningly red.

“Where are we, anyway?” Pete asked. “This place is ten times bigger than I thought!”

“But what it was built for, we still don’t know,” Bob noted.

“We’ll figure it out,” Jupiter said. “Come on, fellas.”

They ran down the corridor. Again, there were doors left and right, all closed. Only the one at the end of the corridor was open a little. The Three Investigators came rushing through.

It was an anteroom, with a desk and a computer. On the wall was a large glass panel, from which they could see into the back room where Olin stood fiddling with a large metal object lying on a table. On one wall, there were monitors that showed the images from the cameras installed all over the facility.

Olin looked up. He was not surprised. Probably he had followed The Three Investigators through the cameras the whole time. A door led into the back room. Bob ran towards it. It was locked. Of course it was locked. There was no handle, no lock, just another keypad.

Olin turned back to his work. The object on the table was a cone-shaped, matt black metal object of almost one metre long. A symbol that Pete knew too well—an eerie silver spider baring its fangs. Project Spider!

Bob also had a strange feeling. He had seen this black metal cone with the silver spider before. He desperately tried to remember when and where he'd seen it.

With flying fingers, Olin connected a few wires to the back of the cone. They led to a small device that stood beside it.

"If we can't get through the door, we'll just take the window," Pete decided, grabbed the desk chair and threw it against the window with all his might. The chair flew back and just missed Pete. The glass shook only slightly.

"Safety glass," Jupiter noted. "I believe we have entered something like the sanctuary of this facility. Olin! Can you hear me?"

He did not respond.

"Soundproof safety glass." Jupiter discovered an intercom system on the desk. He pressed the talk button. "Olin?"

"You're fast," Olin's voice sounded slightly distorted from the loudspeaker.

"Give up, Olin. You're not getting out of this room. It's better you end this voluntarily."

"Wrong," Olin replied. "No one gets out of here alive."

"What do you mean, Olin?"

Instead of answering, Olin just grinned devilishly and connected one last cable.

The realization struck Bob like lightning. Adrenaline was pumping through his body. Now he knew what that black cone with the silver spider was! He knew what was on the table in front of Olin!

"A bomb!" he gasped.

Pete and Jupiter stared at him. “What?”

“That is a bomb!” Bob repeated.

“You guys are smarter than I thought,” Olin said. “You’re right, Bob. A bomb. And I’ve just connected the detonator.”

He turned the little device around. A red display showed the time—ten minutes. Olin pushed a button and the countdown started.

9:59

“In the next five minutes, I could stop the countdown. After that it will be too late. There will be another five minutes and this whole place will blow up.” He laughed. It was a shrill, crazy laugh.

“What... what... why are you doing this, Olin?” Jupiter stammered.

“Because you have disturbed the tranquillity of the ancestors. Just like the men who built this place. You have desecrated the sanctuary and brought the curse. Makatao is a holy place and it has been desecrated. The ancestors chose me to avenge them!”

For a moment, The Three Investigators were speechless. What was this madman saying?

“You can’t be serious!” cried Bob.

“He who disturbs the rest of the dead is doomed to die himself.”

“That was your plan from the beginning,” said Jupiter and a cold shiver ran down his spine. “You came on this expedition to blow up all this!”

“All right. It’s true, Jupiter, I really was here a few hours ago. To install the bomb.”

“Where did you get this thing anyway?” cried Pete.

Olin laughed. “I brought it. It was on board the *Explorer* the whole time. I think you dragged it up here yourself, Pete. The others, of course, had no idea. With all this equipment, another wooden box is more or less unnoticeable.”

“Why... why did you set yourself down here?”

“This is the best place for the explosion. When the bomb detonates, everything will be destroyed. You won’t be able to stop it. Get out while you still can. Otherwise, in nine minutes you’ll be buried under millions of tons of volcanic rock. Perhaps the spirits of the ancestors will spare you!”

Jupiter released the button on the intercom and interrupted the connection. He turned so that Olin couldn’t see his lips.

“Talk to him! Try to dissuade him from the madness! I’ll see if I can open the door. Maybe I can short out the keypad.”

He pressed back the intercom button and went to the door. Olin couldn't see him here. The keypad was screwed down. No time for the gentle approach.

Jupiter grabbed the chair and rammed the chair leg into the plastic housing again and again until it was shattered and released a mess of cables.

"If you don't stop the countdown, you'll die as well," shouted Bob.

"I was chosen to do this," Olin said.

This seemed to have a logic for Olin that Bob could not understand. "But there are still people up there! Innocent people!"

"No one here is innocent. Not you, not the others and not me. But I get a chance to save my soul if I clean Makatao from the infidel tomb robbers. The spirits of the ancestors will decide who will be punished and who will not."

Bob took a look at the display.

8:12

"This is madness, Mr Olin!" Pete tried. "No one here wanted to desecrate any sanctuary! The people who are here did not build this place after all!"

"But they disturbed the peace of the ancestors. The desecration must end! This facility must be destroyed once and for all!"

"You're going to kill us all!" Pete cried out in rage.

"You know what I told you, Pete. No one who's been on Makatao too long leaves the island alive. The curse will bring them all down."

Jupiter only listened with half an ear. He worked feverishly on the destroyed keypad. There were so many cables! So many connections and ports! If only he had time! Just a few minutes more. He peered through the safety glass at the detonator.

7:27

In two minutes and twenty-seven seconds, it would be too late, then the countdown could not be stopped.

He turned back to the cables. Focus! He had to concentrate! The red wire leads from the red light into the wall, the green wire connects to the buttons...

Meanwhile, Bob and Pete ran out of arguments. Olin paid no attention to their words anyway. With a feverish glint in his eyes he stared at the bomb—his tool of destruction.

6:50

It was maddening! That man didn't listen to them at all! He was completely trapped in his own world. How could Pete have been so wrong about him?

Furious with rage, the Second Investigator reached for the chair and rammed it against the bulletproof glass. Again and again and again and again he rammed it. The glass would not crack at all.

"Flee while you still can," Olin said calmly. "Maybe the spirits will spare you."

5:52

No more time to think. No time for analysis and logic. Jupiter just had to try! He tore the red and the green cable from the wall and brought them together.

Nothing happened.

5:39

Then Bob thought of something! "If the bomb goes off, the whole tomb will be destroyed! You will anger the ancestors even more, Olin. Think about it."

"The ancestors will never forgive you for that," Pete added.

Olin winced. Slowly he looked up. For a moment, the insane glow had disappeared from his face. Calmly he looked at the two detectives through the thick window.

5:26

His hand slid towards the detonator in an infinitely slow movement. His index finger remained over the red button he had used to start the countdown. He still stared at it. The Three Investigators held their breath as the seconds passed.

5:11

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

"I'm sorry," Olin said, lowered his head and slowly pulled his hand back.

4:59

"Get away!" cried Pete. "We have to get out of here!" He was quick to press a button on the stopwatch function of his watch. Then he rushed out of the anteroom.

Faster, faster! Going through the numerous corridors, the place was like a mine—and now it's a death trap mine.

Pete was the first to enter the lift. Bob and Jupiter also pushed their way in. Pete kicked away the bar that had blocked the lift and pushed the

button. The doors closed.

Nothing happened.

The lift did not move.

“Come on, come on, come on!” murmured Bob.

“You stupid thing, move!” cried Pete.

“The escape hatch!” cried Jupiter. “The lift won’t start because the hatch is open! Probably as a safety precaution.”

“And how do we get it back?” Pete shouted.

“We can’t. I smashed it.”

“We have to climb!” Pete jumped up and pulled himself up through the opening in no time at all. Feverishly, he looked around. He reached for the steel rope and slipped right off again. It was oiled. There was no ladder, no footbridges, no projections to climb up the shaft.

The Second Investigator jumped back. “Forget it. We gotta find another way!”

He pressed the button to open the lift door. In panic, he looked at his watch. A good four minutes left.

Bob jumped out of the lift and tried the next door. Locked. The next one. Locked. Next one. It opened!

It was dark inside. Only the faint red glow from the corridor gave them an idea of this room. The room had rough rock walls that were painted with bizarre ancestral images.

Bob stared at them. The strange faces stared back. He stood there stunned. All of a sudden, something got to him, something breaking inside him, and he just couldn’t move.

“Come on! There’s a staircase at the back,” cried Pete and ran towards it. The little light coming from the door was not enough. Pete groped his way and finally hit the first step. “I got it.” It was a stone spiral staircase.

In semi-darkness, Pete stumbled up. He could hear Jupiter gasping close behind him. Around, around, and further up! Sweat ran down his body, his heart beat painfully against his ribs. He plunged, pulled himself up again. With his hands groping along the wall, he climbed up in the darkness. The staircase seemed endless. And time was running out as well. Then Pete crashed into a wall. He staggered back. No, it was not a wall. It was a door. The Second Investigator ripped it open and rushed outside.

There was a corridor. They were upstairs again. The armoured door should be somewhere. One look at his watch—two and a half minutes left.

“Where is the exit?” Pete cried.

“There!” cried Jupiter, although he did not know for sure, and ran off. Around the corner, straight ahead, around the next corner... there was the armoured door!

Locked. It was locked.

But next to the keypad, there was a red lever embedded in the wall above which was the label ‘Emergency’. It was the emergency exit! The First Investigator pushed it down. A deafening alarm went off. For one terrible moment, nothing happened.

But then the door slid open. In front of him stood Juan and Professor Phoenix, who pressed a cloth to his bleeding forehead. They stared at him in surprise.

“What happened?” asked the professor.

“No time! We gotta get out of here!”

“Excuse me?”

“Olin has a bomb!” cried Pete. “In less than two minutes, this whole place is going to blow! Get out! Get out!”

Pete did not wait to see if they understood what he was saying. He rushed past them, crossed the command centre and went upstairs. He continued through the tunnel into the prayer chamber. And here Pete realized that something was wrong. Something was wrong.

Jupiter was just catching up with him when he realized what it was.

“Bob! Where’s Bob?” Pete shouted.

“What?” Jupiter exclaimed.

“Where’s Bob?” Pete repeated. “He’s, uh... He was behind you the whole time, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, I thought he was behind me!” Jupiter cried. “But then... I didn’t look back!”

“Bob! Bob’s still down there somewhere!” Pete looked at his watch again. He could still make it. He sprinted off, collided with Professor Phoenix in the tunnel and yelled: “Get out of here!”

“And what about you?” Phoenix shouted.

“I must find Bob!”

The white steel door. The stairs. Pete jumped down more than he ran. He had just crossed halfway through the command centre when the armoured door was closing. Pete stepped on it, but he didn’t make it. The sliding door just closed, the alarm went silent. It was dead silent.

“Bob!” Pete screamed.

No answer. “Bob!!!”

There was no more time. Sixty seconds left. Pete struggled with himself, turned around, stopped again, banged on the door. “Bob!!!”

Fifty seconds. He had to get out of here! Pete sprinted back through the command centre, up the stairs, down the tunnel, through the prayer chamber. He reached the stone stairs when the altar door was closing by itself. At the last moment, he squeezed through the opening and was outside.

Jupiter stood in front of him and stared at him in panic. He grabbed him by the shoulders. “What about Bob?”

“I don’t know! He’s still down there!”

Fourteen seconds.

“We have to get out of here!”

Tears of anger and desperation shot Pete in the eyes as he ran through the labyrinth of ruins to the edge of the crater.

Seven.

The last wall. Behind it, a steep slope led up.

No time left! Pete threw himself on the slope away from the volcano crater that was about to collapse! He buried his face in the earth, crossed his arms over his head and counted the seconds.

Three.

Two.

One.

Zero.

*To be continued in
Part III: The Curse of the Tombs.*